

LGBTQI STORIES



         

#PassSOGIEEqualityBill
#LGBTQILivesMatter

LGBTQI STORIES

PRODUCED BY

Alyansa ng Kabataang Mindanao para sa Kapayapaan (AKMK)

Tri-people's Organization against Disasters Foundation (TRIPOD)

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COVER AND BOOK DESIGN

Reemar B. Alonsagay and Safrola G. Cabaro



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FORWARD

“Pride is for everyone.”

When one pauses to reflect on this quote, it would probably have been taken positively by everyone. It really is empowering, as it conveys a strong message to the rest of the community---encouraging everyone to further fight for the cause.

But when the cause is faltered, one could really go wrong. Sadly, it isn't the premise of the universe. Pride isn't for everyone. It is not the cardinal rule of the democratic country we are living in. Notwithstanding the odds of the members of the community, it is the Catholic Church that is the primary concern of the crusaders. Predominantly a Catholic country, Philippine catechetical people reiterate in a frequent manner their denouncement of the immorality of perhaps the controversial bill concerning the rights of the LGBTQIA+ community---the SOGIE bill. Even the lawmakers aren't as welcoming.

In this issue of the AKMK Magazine, we present to you the various voices of the members of the community. Each has their own unique way of telling their stories---their plight, life experiences, and testimonies most specifically life-changing moments brought by the organization.

Take for example the story of Mother Gigay, who has been lambasted because of his sexuality. Her narrative permeates into each member of the community, as they share the same plight and grievances. The struggle to live her true self has never been difficult. Living with ridicule and judgment, Mother Gigay is a living testament of the unjust treatment of the “straight ” populace to the LGBTQIA+ people. We deem highly of their identity but only because we are born different, the supposed reciprocated fair treatment we should get is nowhere to be found. The respect is nowhere to be found. We are in between blurry lines.

As a proud member, I am deeply saddened by the continuing struggle of my fellow LGBTQI. But hope will never falter. Its ray of sunshine will always be upon us no matter what.

This issue does not only show the enumeration of the works of the organization. With its premise of integrating peace and human rights and civic efforts, AKMK magazine is also a vanguard of truth and justice. We bring you inspiration with the stories that we have compiled over the course of time. These stories are reflected in the present time ---- stories that embody the altruism of the real scenario of the subject. The stories of Czesar, Mother Gigay, Jevie Lae, Mother Ayeng, Czian, Shantal, Balas, Jhino, Marc Allen, Carl and MJ are the accounts mirroring our times.

These narratives do not just settle in the steppes of nowhere. Dark void they may seem, but they don't stay forever as they are. Everyday, these stories come out in the open. These stories are the real people with real experiences----riveting, compelling, rendering.

AKMK, as an avenue of truth and justice conveys the message across and bridges the minds of its readers with the needed information concerning its peace work, community organizing and civic efforts.

We hope this issue inspires you to become aware of the things around you, in purport realization of the struggles of the people who belong to the unique circle ---- the colorful LGBTQIA+ community.

Deviant as they may seem but they are worthy of the good things that the "straight" people enjoy. The same freedom, the same rights, the same willpower.

Pett Sabelo
Editor



AKMK MESSAGE

Welcome to our LGBTQI magazine, a publication dedicated to showcasing the diverse and powerful stories of LGBTQI individuals in Mindanao, Philippines. This booklet is a testament to the bravery and resilience of the queer community in facing the challenges and struggles that come with being part of a marginalized group.

For far too long, the voices and experiences of LGBTQI individuals in Mindanao have been overlooked and silenced. This magazine is a platform for the queer community to speak out, be heard, and be seen. It is a space where we celebrate our identities, our culture, and our achievements.

The stories and struggles shared in this magazine shed light on the discrimination, violence, and social stigma that LGBTQI individuals face in Mindanao. These experiences are not unique to our community, but they are amplified by the intersection of being queer and living in a predominantly conservative and religious region.

Despite the challenges, the queer community in Mindanao has shown remarkable resilience and strength. Our stories are not just stories of pain and struggle, but also of hope, courage, and triumph.

We hope that this booklet will serve as a tool for education, awareness, and advocacy for the LGBTQI community in Mindanao and beyond. Our goal is to break down the barriers that prevent us from being fully accepted and embraced for who we are.

We want to express our deep appreciation to all the individuals who have contributed their stories, experiences, and perspectives to this magazine. Your voices are important, and your stories are valuable. We hope that this magazine will inspire others to speak out and join us in the fight for equality, justice, and human rights.

Thank you for joining us on this journey, and we hope you find inspiration, empowerment, and connection in our LGBTQI magazine.

AKMK Council Member

TRIPOD MESSAGE

The plights and issues of LGBTI people are of great importance that are integral in the human rights, humanitarian and peace works of TRIPOD. Just as important as the issues and concerns of children, youth, women, IDPs and other vulnerable sectors as enshrined in TRIPOD's vision statement of a society where all peoples especially the vulnerable sectors enjoy their rights, have equal opportunities and respect.

Being a project grantee of the Voice Philippines holding the project of the rights' holder group - the Alyansa ng Kabataang Mindanao para sa Kapayapaan (AKMK), it is a great opportunity for TRIPOD to accompany the young tri-people LGBTI community in their actions and struggles to promote and advance their rights as human beings.

This project has made symbiotic impacts to TRIPOD work because at one hand it gives us an opportunity to work directly on the issues of LGBTI people while on the other hand, the project leverages change in the perspectives of Bangsamoro, Lumad and Migrant Settler's communities to whom we intensively work with; especially the religious and tribal leaders who went through gradual change towards becoming more open and sensitive to the plights and conditions of the LGBTI people.

Thank you for this great opportunity and Kudos to AKMK and Voice Philippines!

Yennah Torres

Executive Director

Tri-People's Organization Against Disasters Foundation (TRIPOD)



They say that life is a roller coaster ride and God gives us unexpected twists. Hi, I'm Czesar James Belmores but you can call me Czjy. I grew up in the Southern part of Mindanao in Kalamansig, Sultan Kudarat in a family whose reputation has been linked to the Catholic Church for decades. My grandfather was a longtime member of the Knights of Columbus, my grandmother was a devout part of the Catholic Women's League, my father and his siblings were members of the choir - while me, their little altar boy. I spent most of my childhood in the four corners of our church.

While other kids were strolling and going to the beach for summer vacation, I was making flower crowns Mama Mary as we celebrate Flores De Mayo. I was busy singing songs to Mary, praying the rosary, and learning the life and works of Jesus. In my teenage years, I became a Catechist and taught children about the life of Christ. We used to sing and dance to the tune of “Ang Mga Ibon ay Lumilipad”, roleplayed significant events in the Bible and rendered our offerings of flowers to Mary. I then became a Psalmist; my father was the guitarist while I sing or chant the Responsorial Psalm. I had the entire church become my family.

Years have passed and I have found myself entering the halls of a Seminary formation in Cotabato City. I knew then it was the place for me because I wanted to get closer to God.

Many people told me seminary life isn't for everyone. It's frustrating and at times, saddening. But I persevered - and a much needed help from a fellow seminarian. I didn't know I needed a little push from someone inside the seminary house.

He made me feel comfortable. I was at ease. But boy, did I feel something weird. It was a literal confusion. I was baffled but would feel better whenever our eyes meet. I know it's wrong. I nurtured a feeling that shouldn't be there at all. It grew but I didn't let it get through me.

IT IS WRONG!

But damn it felt so right but wrong at the same time. And that's when I decided I must stop. I prayed and asked for His guidance. All I wanted was to be his servant and I the fear of failing Him was very hard to imagine. I left the formation and eventually left Mindanao at the same time.

For years, I landed in a job with a diverse kind of people mostly dominated by members of the LGBTQI community. The BPO industry became a family I never imagined I'd have. I thought to myself, this is the place where I can truly fit in.

But I had doubts back then. What if I come out? What if I unravel the mask - so and so, I was in a limbo of what ifs. But with the seemingly kitsch community I was in, coming out as gay was no longer a big deal. Around the circle, you'd literally witness pure gayness and uncensored representation of sexual orientations. Eventually I met my “beshies”, “yots” and “sissies”.

These groups are composed of feminine gays, transgender women and crossdressers while the other side of the smoking area are for the, what they call “paminta”, gay men with a more masculine expression - sometimes referred to as the “closet queens”. For these people, you can only be either one of them and in between. Whenever I am with the momshies they’d always brag about how happy it is to be like them and be with them. If you’re gay, you’re gay. No holiness slips in. On the other hand, to be with the so-called “closet queens” is a different experience.

Suddenly, I felt like I didn’t belong to the group. To be a “paminta” isn’t like me, after all. Then came the 2019 Metro Manila Pride #ResistTogether, it became an eye opener for me on the real situation of the LGBTQI in the Philippines. The more I engage my self on the activity the more I learned about how others express themselves and even more I learn about myself.

It was colorful, it was fun, but it was heartbreaking at the same time realizing how these people are being denied of their very existence.

From that day on, I carried those learnings everywhere I go. Whoever I talk to, I preach about my colourful community.

I thought, this realization should not end within me and must be shared to others. I became an active member of the LGBT organization in Kalamanasig and soon after became its President. I landed a position in the Provincial LGBTQI federation of Sultan Kudarat. I was invited by AKMK in their Local-Wide Workshop in Kolambugan, Lanao del Norte.

As I go through the rigorous phase of fleshing out the very core of the community to the rest of the people, I was more disheartened knowing the amount of hate crimes my co-participants have experienced, something that I only see and hear in mainstream media. But I was also empowered knowing that I can create change - that I am capable of pushing for my right and the right of my fellow people.

Now that my true calling was finally revealed after me, a calling that will not only open the minds of the people but break the chains of oppression that has held us captive away from the rays of justice - I declare that this is my pledge, my commitment for myself and for the entire LGBTQI people to become an agent of peace, justice and equality, to promote life in all its fairness and to be one with the community. An unapologetic, resisting, progressing LGBTQI Community.



THE COMING OUT EXPERIENCE

Perhaps I can relate my life to a movie because of the acts I had to endure with.

I grew up with a family of two but most of the time I live with my non-biological family. It is kind of a complicated setup and a challenging one, too. Growing up I have been surrounded by straight men - the same people who would constantly convince me of joining the military. As always, I'd politely decline. On the other hand, my biological family, was not totally the opposite but not tolerating. I have taken the responsibility as a role model to my siblings - the reason I felt I never really had the chance of opening up about my true sexuality. The responsibility took a toll on my "coming out".

At a tender age of 10, I started to have confusions within my true self. I am born male and wrong as it seemed years ago - at least in the eyes of the people around me - I was attracted to the same sex. The feeling of uncertainty progressed until my puberty years. As I didn't know much anything about gender orientations, I was always confused. And anxious. And lost.

My understanding about my sex was that it is a disease that needs to be cured so I resorted to so-called remedies. The one thing I tried out was to engage in heterosexual relationships. For the record, I had four girlfriends. All of the four relationships failed. It only contributed to my anxiety. I felt nothing really changed. That was the moment I realized mine was not just a disease - it is an identity that needed acknowledgement.

But I was always scared.

What if I come out? What if people know I lead a double life?

I was in constant confusion. But thanks to my circle of friends, they always try to understand the things that I am going through. After I finished high school, I decided not to further my studies for reasons I wish not to tell. But I didn't want to be a freeloader so I looked for jobs. I try to be as manly as possible at workplace. People didn't know I was gay. For some who happens to have a strong ESP, they'd laugh and say things behind my back.

I was subjected to discrimination and humiliation. I was ridiculed and sometimes got laughed at but I kept going. From working as a sales staff, service crew, dish washer, events supplier, choreographer, to a government employee, I was met with mixed reactions from the people around me.

I started engaging myself in various organizations last 2020.

I thought it would be nice if I try to immerse myself in an exciting environment. I joined an LGBT organization in my place which aimed at launching our own platform as members of the community where we can foray into relative causes. At first I was hesitant since I wasn't really into speaking but the people helped me with the things that has to be done. Until one participant encouraged me to join one particular engagement in an LGBT seminar for the education of a certain barangay. This was the second I got an invitation and I couldn't afford to say no to her this time. The first time I really declined as I have personal errands to attend to at the time but this time, I must not let it pass. So I said yes to the invitation.

It was a three-day seminar-workshop in Kolambugan, Lanao del Norte and honestly speaking I really didn't know what to do there. I was a fish out of water. The affair started by introducing ourselves and soon after activity proper began. Bearing witness to the testimonials of my co-participants, I was blown away with their stories. The narrative of struggles and hardships came outpouring.

In a fleeting moment, I was petrified. I thought my experiences of discrimination and prejudices are bad enough - little did I know these people share the same plight as mine. Up until today, I still remember how inspired I was during the presentation of the organization's advocacy into achieving total acceptance of the LGBT community in the Philippines. If heterosexual individuals experience discrimination, how much hate does the LGBT people get, perhaps, on a daily basis? That is why equality among various representations must be achieved. People in the organization, having them was a breath of fresh air. It felt like I was also touched by their empowerment - I felt enamored.

After the seminar-workshop, I feel more hopeful and vivacious than ever. It opened my eyes to the possibility of doors letting me in for opportunities, for possible collaborative projects in the future.

Subsequently, I was offered a number of speaking engagements as I continue my journey of being the voice of the voiceless. The lessons I acquired from the rigorous seminar workshops have honed me into a better version of myself. I learned to accept my flaws, to accept who I really am.

I am a proud LGBTQIA member, an advocate, a volunteer and a part of technical working group of VOICE project of AKMK.



DISCOVERING MY TRUE SELF THROUGH ADVOCACY WORKS

I learned about my true self by participating leadership trainings/seminars at school. I immersed in a variety of organizations while I was still a student, starting from elementary through senior high school and up until college.

I must say that the organization has made me who I am today. I discovered my strengths and weaknesses. I was exposed to different people and individuals whom I share the same cause which later on taught me how to compose myself.

On the seminar proper, for example, the event will be led by the leader. A leader should be able to follow and be considerate to others being the “soul” of the whole group.

You should be able to reconcile people and make them believe you are as effective leader as they expect you to be. Influence is also utilized for future organizing events and functions.

I remained inside my house during the pandemic, like others who fear for their lives. But I believe I had to do something worthwhile, something that is worth my time. An opportunity came knocking when out of the blue Juhaiver Maruhom offered me something I could not resist. I was given the chance to discover who I was. I was given a role in promoting LGBT rights. I was exhilarated and dubious at the same time.

Because of my culture and faith, I found it extremely difficult to accept this campaign for LGBTQI+ empowerment. Being a part of the LGBTQI+ community goes against our Islam religion's strict prohibitions. And while I find it quite difficult to advocate for this kind of activism, I did so nevertheless because I think it will be beneficial to myself, to the LGBTQI+ community, and particularly to the Meranao LGBTQI+.

I encountered difficulties in carrying out this activity in my locality, but with the help of Allah Ta'ala, I have overcome these difficulties. Big thanks to my teammates and other participants who share the same passion as me with the advocacy, I was able to conquer everything.

More specifically at this point in my life, I believe that this project made me discover a lot of things. With the purporting struggles of the community, I think there is no greater glory than team up with people who inspire us to become the best version of ourselves. This endeavor has given me the ability to express who I am.

Thank you to AKMK, TRIPOD, and VOICE for giving me the opportunity to work with you since day one. I can now prove to myself I can do more things only because of faith, proper training and immersion, and an immense talent so I could perform well in every task that is bound for me to do.

Mohammad Jalani S. Arumpac



STANDING UP FOR WHAT IS RIGHT AND JUST FOR LGBTQI

My name is Garry C. Bulay, 29 years of age. I live in Tigbao, Zamboanga Del Sur. As a proud member of the LGBTQIA community, I consider myself as a transwoman. I go by the name of Gigay, a term apropos to my given name. I was made to believe, at an early age, with the fact that I am just a nobody - an outcast. And that's because I was born gay. I was called names, a whore, a pestilence, oftentimes even told I was one of the works of the devil. I was bullied and was subject to some heinous forms of verbal abuse but I stood on my ground. I didn't let my detractors block my way. But people can really be cruel - badder, feister, scarier. Because of the severe bullying I get, I decided not to finish college. I was in constant fear of putting myself in humiliation. I was always scared. It gave me a lifetime trauma.

I stopped the illusion of getting a degree so I started to look for jobs in order to support myself. I thought to myself, none of these people could stop me from reaching my dreams so I persevered.

I became a house help and even worked for other people and attended their needs - whatever have them. Years later, I fulfilled my dream of becoming a makeup artist. I may never have a certificate from a reputable makeup school, the fact that I learned the very quintessence of glamming up a certain look is already enough for me to immerse myself in the industry. Not only that, I also did try a hand at massage therapy and made it as a part-time job. I learned that in life, you have to actually brave the fear and keep abreast with the undertakings. You have to be strong for you and for the identity that you are fighting for. With immense talent and capabilities, you are able to reach your goals in life.

One day, I got acquainted with a member of AKMK and asked me if I was willing to attend a certain function. I was enthralled upon knowing how the organization works, mostly for its LBGTQIA symposiums, workshops, among other things. Soon after I became a part of the technical working group (TWG) in Zamboanga Peninsula and have since pursued almost everything. I was proud of what I have become. The activities helped me discover my abilities as a member of the colourful community. At a recently-concluded event in Kolambugan, I was named an AKMK ambassador - it gave me even a little push to weather the responsibilities I was tasked to do in the organization. I also ventured into gay beauty pageants. I was adjudged first runner up in Ms. Gay Poblacion Tigbao Zamboanga Del Sur and in Ms. Q and A Zamboanga Del Sur during a pride month celebration.



With all my experiences and the things that I went through, I have realized that life is a rolling ball that keeps putting us in places we never anticipate. It is a continuous struggle, especially as a member of the LGBTQIA community. Our rights may be denied but we shall never waver from achieving our dreams. The respect that we long for will be rendered to us in no time - that, I believe will come true as long as we work hand in hand. Along with our contemporaries and peers and with the lawmakers who fight with us, we are able to reach our dreams.

I believe we are worthy of respect and salutation.
All we need is unity and respect.

The freedom that we long for will be manifested right in front of us.



BEING A SUBANEN GAY

Gempya Gendaw!

My name is Jevie Lae.

I was born a Lumad, specifically from a Subanen tribe. I am a proud member of LGBTQIA community. Coming from an indigenous family, it really is a struggle and a tedious task to be able to unmask my true identity. And I believe I am a work in progress. The elders in the tribe would often reprimand or warn us about the Diwatas - that once I reveal my true self, these mythical creatures would cast spell or worse, curse me. Homosexuality is considered a violation of our belief. The blasphemous things that are being thrown at my family are already enough for me to hide my identity. We were called immoral, witchcraft people, and trolls - even vampires.

Going to school was one thing I pursued on.

It was something I believe would take away all the negative things in my life.

I finished a degree in Education (Bachelor in Elementary Education) at H.C. Cerilles State College. I am thankful to my “ancestors” and the “diwatas” who have guided throughout my journey in my pursuit of knowledge. Soon after I became a tribal teacher and taught my fellow tribe people to read, write and count. I thought that by helping my community, it would open doors to my fellow people for better opportunities like what education did to me. Coming from an indigenous community, I know how urban people ridicule us. Be it illiterate, stupid, dumb or untidy - we are never safe from the scrutinizing eyes of other people. By educating my fellow tribe people, I am breaking the stigma.

Through a friend, I was able to accomplish one of the things that I have longed to do - to work for a cause relative to my gender identity. I was lucky to be a part of such cause that tackles the struggles and the core nature of the LGBTQIA community. In no time I became a local coordinator. But doubts came rushing in. I was in a limbo of thoughts whether to accept the role or not as I fear that my tribal leaders and elders would know about it. But as my colleagues told me, if I believe in what I do with no fear of breaking the boundaries then I should go for it.

AKMK gave me a platform in order for me to share my insights and knowledge regarding the current situation of the LGBTQIA community in the tribal aspect. Because of the seminars, workshops and talks, I have become aware of my true identity. I have to come to my own terms and soon found out I was bisexual. I was at first scared to reveal but with the help of the organization, I went out and proud. I am what I am, as Shirley Bassey quotes in her iconic song.

At AKMK, I found a family. I met new friends and even the ones that I consider brothers and sisters. The people are kind and friendly and are really understanding of what I am going through. I am still a tribal teacher and I can say that I somehow bring hope and inspiration to my fellow people as I continue to gain values and a positive attitude the organization has instilled in me.

As I always quote in my talks, “Don’t wait for opportunity, create it.”



MY TRANSFORMATION TO BECOME LGBTQI LEADER

My name is Earl Jay Alfaro, also known as Shantal Ortega. I am 26 years old. I am currently residing in Brgy. Maria Cristina, Iligan City. I am a proud member of the LGBTQIA community identifying myself as a transwoman. I was born out of a happy family with a happy childhood. Ever since I was young, I knew I was different. I like the idea of me wearing woman's clothes. Luckily, my mother was very much supportive of me. She was always there for me. My mother was my rock. Despite myself, I am loved by someone I consider my hero. And with the path I chose, I never ceased in helping my fellowmen in my small community. As a matter of fact, during the onslaught of Typhoon Sendong in 2012, I was a volunteer and took the role of a peer educator to the youth of Cagayan de Oro City. I met someone from the outreach program whose advocacy is related to LGBTQIA rights. In no time, I joined the LGBTQIA group which he was associated with out of interest.

I joined because I wanted to partake in the efforts being done by them - more so with the fact that I wanted to do something for my community. I thought, perhaps I could offer something to my fellow people.

But little did I know that a devastating news would somehow change my perspective in life. My mother, who was my number one fan, suddenly passed away in 2014. It was a shock that was worth perishing, at least at the time I was mourning. She was all I had. I was very close to her and we had a kind of relationship...a kind of bond I didn't have with my father since he seldom speak to me for whatever reason I don't know. But before her passing, she told me my father loves me. I don't know whether to believe her or not. Perhaps what she had just told me was a consolation. When she was gone, I lost focus on my advocacy. But to my surprise, my father reached out to me and said it pains him to see me weeping and mourning. He also told me he couldn't stand watching me getting bullied and all.

That was a turning point for me.

Finally, some words of encouragement from someone I thought didn't like me at all. He has been, after all, watchful and observant. I didn't realize he was that loving father I wanted him to be.



I knew by that moment, my father have already accepted my true identity. I persevered to get his approval even more. I worked as a pageant coordinator and a makeup artist. At the same time, I was juggling through college. When I thought everything goes to what I have planned, COVID-19 came in the picture. The pandemic seemed to have halted the world and so was my schooling. During the onset of the pandemic, I realized how marginalized people gets treated during a health crisis. People of ordinary status barely have food on their plate. I saw how lame the government is. The bias towards my fellow community members was also evident.

With the willingness to serve my fellow people, I helped establish GALA or Gays and Lesbians in Action. It is an organization aimed at helping the marginalized people, especially those who consider themselves as LGBTQIA members. I was elected Vice-President. It was fun working for the group I lend my hands on. I also joined other LGBTQIA support groups, until one day I got an invitation to participate in a certain talk called VOICE, a gay rights and welfare group organized by AKMK. Through VOICE, people can have better access to information about their rights most especially individuals who consider themselves as members of LGBTQIA.

This 2023, I am more than excited for the new role that I am taking in. I am more than willing to man such a powerful and stronger LGBTQIA group. I knew in my heart I am ready to face life's challenges. I knew I had to take a lead so I took the responsibility with open arms. With the immense help of AKMK, GALA reached the apex of success. It was a successful organization. In no time, I spearheaded the gracing of the LGBT desk in our barangay. GALA also has a physical office, which was very exciting. As an advocate, I thought I have a duty to submit myself to public service. Fighting for my fellow people's rights can be quite challenging but also worthwhile one. Besides doing talks, the organization also did coastal clean-ups, tree planting activities, leadership training, SOGIE orientation - among others. These and more are going to happen for the forthcoming GALA seminar this year. As GALA's founding member I am thankful to AKMK for all the support they have given us.



Issues & Concerns	Demand & Proposals
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Gina-judge about religion• Cat-Calling• Bullying• Culture• Stereotyping / Prejudice	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Separation of Church & State- Local Ordinance against discrimination & Cat-Calling- Impose Sanction (FINE)- Social Reconstruction- Social Reconstruction

STARTED AS PARTICIPANT, NOW AM PROUD TO CALL MYSELF AS A STAUNCH OF LGBTQI ADVOCACY

Hi, my name is Jhino M. Villarin from the Municipality of Maigo, Province of Lanao del Norte. Early on, my parents already knew the real Jhino. They both accepted I wasn't the boy they wanted me to be. I was thankful my parents were as understanding and loving. They were not tolerating but they were very supportive of my decision.

At 20, I started to rally out my cause as an LGBT member. I engaged in various organizations. I was never a conversationalist at first but when I began immersing myself to civic works and social engagements, I suddenly gained confidence. From being a mere participant who only observes and listens, I now do the honor of speaking in seminars and trainings and that further molded me into what I have become today. Public speaking is a frightening thing but with the right amount of confidence, trust and wit, you are able to deliver.

Advocacy was the one thing the organization has been working for. It was a continuous process of getting the recognition the LGBTQIA people wanted.

Because LGBTQIA rights is a universal concern, advocates from different countries like Germany, Belgium, Netherlands, Kenya, among others flock to the country to share their advocacy about gender rights. With the help of AKMK, I have become empowered and enamored with knowledge and skills. The path wasn't easy but it was worthwhile.

My first engagement was with CSO specifically the Human Security Collective. At the beginning we were only conducting series of activities, training and workshops regarding youth empowerment. But soon after we levitated into having the opportunity to hold and present our project initiative. It was a success as predicted. With AKMK's recommendation, I got an invitation to participate in one of VOICE's speaking engagement, the LGBT Strengthening. My schedule was piled up with tons of extracurricular activities and prior engagements but I persevered to join the advocacy. The seminar was fulfilling and educating. I was enlightened about the real score of SOGIE Bill in the country. With my experience as an advocate, I am now one of the Technical Working Group of VOICE in my area. I, too, became a resource speaker for SOGIE Bill Orientation.

I am deeply grateful to AKMK for without them, I wouldn't be as assertive and effective advocate of the rights of the LGBTQIA community.





MY SEXUALITY AND MY RELIGION

Growing up, I seldom speak to people. I became elusive, even to my own family. As an Islam, my faith to Allah was as important as my existence. There was no negotiating, so to speak. My parents were the first ones to instill in me the teachings of Islam. Even the traditional arranged marriage and starting a family at an early age, I was taught to follow. But something was not right about myself - at least, before I discovered I was born different. I like women but sometimes I am attracted to the same sex. It was weird but it felt good. Unbeknownst to my family, I have been experiencing gender crisis. I started to question my existence. Was I really a creation of Allah? Is this feeling normal?

Until a friend approached me one day. He said my questions would be answered, all it needed was to participate in an LGBTQIA seminar. I then said yes to the invitation. The seminar was fun-filled. They gave me an opportunity to vent out my frustrations about my identity. I was enlightened about my true self. I also had the pleasure of hearing stories of about other people's struggles with their own self, people who have seen the worst and best of being a part of the community.

Then I realized I wasn't alone in this battle. I have the same plight as my co-participants. It was revolting to know that these people are with me.

When I had the chance of attending another seminar in Kolambugan, I again joined without hesitation. It was the same seminar I had before and it was filled with laughters and sharing of accounts that each narrative resonates to the real-life situation of the members of the LGBTQIA community. I have learned a lot from the seminar. I meditated and I found my real truth: I am an Islam and I am proud to be a part of the LGBTQIA community. I'm worthy of love, respect and compassion.





**IT'S OKAY TO
BE GAY!**

I am Marc Allen M. Lauron. I am presently the local cluster coordinator or LCC of Iligan City. Prior to my designation, I was a mere participant from one of the programs of HSC- AKMK's Inclusive Leadership Training and during the series of trainings I was asked by Sir Reemar to be the LCC of Iligan.



I was happy and surprised but hesitant at the same time to accept the offer. Not only will this be my first time to be a part of this amazing project, being an LCC is also a tedious task for me. For a moment I questioned my capabilities. Am I fit for this role? Will I deliver? And the questions went on. But with the encouragement of the group, I let my worries out of the window. During the implementation of the project I'm still groping on what should be done properly and on my end I was lucky that I have a great team that helped me present my purpose efficient and effective.

After hearing stories as being part of the LGBTQIA+ community it drastically changed the way I think. What a lucky human being I am because even though I am different because of my gender identity, I was thankful I didn't receive the same judgements and prejudices my contemporaries had when they were struggling with themselves and were just starting to realize their true identity. To be verbally abused because of our gender was a total horror. Sexual orientation and gender expression can sometimes gain you a horrible experience but sometimes, they can be empowering.

With this stand, I stand with them and amplify their voices to protect and empower the community and to remind them that being yourself is never wrong. Ultimately, I would like to say thank you to the organization for this wonderful opportunity as they have given me an avenue to rally my cause as it also helped me a lot personally. #LGBTLIVESMATTER



**GROWING UP GAY IN A
CONSERVATIVE
COMMUNITY**

“Understanding, respect, love and equality - these are the things that everyone should possess and embody because through this we can apply good quality of education to young people. Affirmation of having acceptance and support system in general must be realized.”

I am Balas Camatua Maruhom, 22 years old of age. I was born on May 28, 2000. I'm currently a student educator and works as a freelance hair and makeup artist. I am a loud and proud member of the LGBTQIA community.

I was like 5 or 6 years old when I started to notice I was different. I'd have episodes of anxiety early on with my childhood as I was beginning to like boys my age. It was strange as I was born a man - at times it would struck me like a bolt. By the time I reached 12 I tried started asking my parents about it. At first impulse, I was scared because as an Islam I know my father would not be as accepting and understanding. Coming from a religious family was a challenge. On the other hand, my mother never asked me anything because I had a hunch she already knew about my sexuality. The popping question remained popping in my head. I never had the chance to ask either one of my parents.

The gender crisis continued until I reached 18. The frustration seemed to overwhelm my system. The indifference was diabolical. It was scary. It was freaky. Because I was already a young adult, the anxious feeling of uncertainty would always get me. People were either mean or good to me. A lot of times, they weren't.

“Ginan a kambakla ka, kambayo-bayot ka na di madti na sikay pigulogin ko naraka, sikay beloyen a' itagun ko apoy sa Narraka.”

This was the one remark from a stranger I will never forget. It was retorted out of malice and ridicule. I was lambasted. I was violated. I was criticized. Just because I was born different, just because I have a deviant sexuality doesn't guarantee less of my worth in this world. But then again at the last thought, perhaps I couldn't anymore change the minds of these people.

Perhaps I'll just let them call me bakla, bayot or malimik. Anyway, I braved myself from every ridicule I get from them. Playing the game wasn't that bad, was it?

It was on December 31, 2021 when my father died and left us. It was heartbreaking. I became anxious on a daily basis. I was depressed. I even attempted to end my life. But the Almighty Allah assured me of a better life ahead of me. I asked and He delivered. I prayed and He answered. My faith was restored. Then I got into this Islam group called Tablig. I needed acceptance and people with an immense grip of faith to Allah and these people didn't disappoint me. Everyone in the group was welcoming, accepting and understanding. They accepted me as I am. They taught me the words of Allah. They gave me an outlet to which I can pour my heartaches and grievances out. I found a family in them. Suddenly I am healed. I was also a part of the LGBTQIA community but at the same time I was associated with a religious Islam group and I couldn't be more thankful. But really, you cannot please everyone. There are few Tablig members who were not as understanding of my gender identity. I lost focus for a moment.

After only a few meditations, I finally decided to leave the group as it wasn't healthy anymore both spiritually and mentally for me. I realized there was only one person in this world that wouldn't leave me - Allah will always be there for me no matter what.

Then there's my family, too. And my friends. They are the ones that really inspired and motivated to do what makes me happy.

We may have varying experiences in life but we should always know that Allah Almighty will always be our rock no matter what.





**I HAVE THE SAME ABILITIES
AND SKILLS AS STRAIGHT
MEN.**

I am Graciano Cañete Bulay, 31 years of age.

Ever since I was young, I knew I was different. I didn't have any male friend. I am mostly surrounded with gals and we would play Barbie dolls and Chinese garter together. With my deviancy, I had a hunch my parents knew about my true identity. It was 2009 and it is time for my college education. My parents told me they couldn't afford sending me to school so I pursued into looking for scholarships. I tried my luck at applying scholarships and sent letters to politicians but unfortunately not one councilor noticed my application. But despite the rejections, I still continued with my studies. My parents were quite unreliable at the time since they could only give me shelter and food. There was one time I had to come home late as I juggled in between school and ROTC and my parents got mad at me. There was also an instance where I asked for some money to pay for a particular fee and they lashed out at me and didn't give me anything.

Since I couldn't anymore support my studies I stopped and only finished ROTC, to my dismay. I resented my parents.

Luckily, I have friend from there who looks for an applicant. In no time, I landed a job at a mini grocery store. The salary good and I even sent some to my parents. I once despised them for not being the parents I wanted them to be but for some reason, I couldn't stand hating any of them. After more than a year, I decided to come home and for a while I was jobless but not later than several months I soon got a cash registry job at a nearby bar. I also got the same work for a convenience store until such time I finally got laid off.

When I heard about the local government unit opening a school for NCII Commercial Cooking, I hurriedly applied since it covers the six months of training and plus monetary incentive will be given after. Half into the year, I finished the course and landed different jobs. I felt no satisfaction with the skill I obtained so I decided to study again for a technical vocational course and this time, I took up Housekeeping for good three months. Sadly, I didn't make it to the finals. I didn't pass the examination but the technical school let me finish the whole three months and instead handed me a Certificate of Completion - this and all the crazy shenanigans while I was working for a bar.

After four years, I finally made amends with myself and decided to finish my college education. But there was a catch: I have an outstanding balance amounting to six thousand pesos from the previous school I attended. But God really is good because I was lucky to have such motivating friends and one of them has an immediate relative who was looking for a working student. I was employed and my boss paid my outstanding balance in exchange of working for her. I eventually enrolled at JHCSC Pagadian Annex where I took up Bachelor of Science in Information Technology. My interest wasn't really in information technology but I didn't have any choice. I graduated July last year.

Despite all the hardships, I thanked God for everything that He has done for me.

I am also in gratitude to my friends who inspired me to actually finish my schooling. I have learned that life really gives us lemons. We just have to make use of our abilities and skills and know how to make a lemonade.



NEVER TOO LATE TO LEARN AND TO FIGHT FOR LGBTQI RIGHTS

My name is Ariel Bonrostro, 39 years of age. I was born in Sarangani Province on February 2, 1984. I finished elementary in 1997 at Pangil Elementary School in Maitum, Sarangani Province. In the same year, my family moved to Kalamansig, Sultan Kudarat where I continued studying and soon after finished my secondary education at Kalamansig National High School in 2001. I tried getting into college but financial constraint stopped me so I flew to Manila for work. For quite some time I worked as a sewer in a garments factory. After several years, I came back and continued working. With a hefty amount in hand, I decided to put up my own tailoring shop where I partnered with my grandmother who also know how to sew. Our small shop became instrumental in aiding our daily needs, bills, among others.

Then came one fateful day.

Suddenly I decided to make a school comeback in 2016. At 32, I braved myself and enrolled as a Senior High School student at my Alma mater. I majored in Dressmaking and Tailoring under the strand Technical Vocational Livelihood program. As an experienced tailor, the school would send me to different dressmaking competitions and became both Division and Regional awardee. I, too, was a consistent honor student as I did well in class. I finished senior high school with flying colors despite working for my own shop at the time. With my determination to reach my goal and family's help, I was able to overcome my pursuit for education. Three years after graduating, I was still working so I could provide for my family's needs.

Last 2021, I finally decided to pursue college and I enrolled at Sultan Kudarat State University-Kalamansig Campus. I took up Bachelor of Science in Fisheries. I ranked first during the online interview and boy, did it feel good. I further validated to myself that it is never too late to learn. During college, I immersed myself not only in learning but also in extra-curricular activities. I joined almost everything. But what delights me is that I was able to join organizations promoting LGBT rights. At KISLAP Kalamansig, I learned to fight for what is right - especially with the community I belong to. The organization aimed at promoting a fair and just treatment among the gay and lesbian community. Thankfully, the Local Government Unit of Kalamansig were very welcoming of us as they are one with the organization in rallying the cause we'd like to address.



To begin with, I was first enjoined at Tri-People Against Disaster, an NGO who became an instrument with the awakening and realizations I had as I rediscovered my true self. Came until such time when I finally joined the AKMK. I have been with them for a year now and since our eyes clapped with each other, we were inseparable. VOICE Philippines became AKMK's partner and I was lucky enough to become a part of such an amazing team as a local coordinator of Kalamansig, Sultan Kudarat Chapter. I am very much thankful to the people and to all the organizations - my TRIPOD family, AKMK family, KILOS-Journey and most especially to our generous partner, the VOICE.

Lastly, let me quote one of my favorite lines: "There is no turning back as I step forward to my future realizing that the trials will just be a part of a game. I play it well and never miss any chances."





@mindanao4peace



akmk_inclusivepeace@protonmail.com



@AKMK



#LGBTQILivesMatter: A Grassroots Tri-People LGBTQI Movement Towards Rights-claiming and Empowerment is empowerment project of Alyansa ng Kabataang Mindanao para sa Kapayapaan (AKMK), Tri-people's Organization Against Disasters Incorporated (TRIPOD), and supported by Voice Philippines.