

Merly Barlaan: Peace Begins With Me

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Reality is how things are. Idealism is how things should be. Sometimes, a disconnect between reality and idealism occurs when even the most iron-clad master plan slows down or fails to reach its intended goal. What does one do when this happens?

For Merly Barlaan it is all about connecting the dots between reality and idealism. Her words ring with idealism. She talks with purpose and walks the talk.



As Vice President of the Women's Federation for World Peace International (WFWPI) and Director, UN Relations, NY, Merly has worked tirelessly to uplift women, youth and families globally through community development projects. She has achieved success not only in the halls of global offices that write policy, but also on the ground, working pro-bono to experience first-hand the obstacles to implementation of projects and learn to better craft programmes for maximum impact.

Hers has been a brave, unconventional, enlightening and fulfilling journey. One could say that she was born for this role.

Let's start from Merly's childhood in Bohol, a province south of the Philippines, where 93.1 million of the country's estimated 115 million population is Roman Catholic. Growing up in a beautiful, idyllic community encouraged her to dream and live with high hopes that her dreams could come true.

She is the seventh child in a loving family of nine siblings whose daily life was firmly rooted in their Catholic faith. Her mother was a catechist and an older sister is a nun. By the time she was seven years old, Merly had read the Holy Bible front to back!



It wasn't a surprise then that she thought the whole world was Catholic. But in her college years, she was exposed to a multi-cultural and multi-faith reality.

"I was shocked but curious and interested to explore!" shares Merly.

As a sophomore at the University of Bohol, Merly joined the Youth for Ethical Society, which became her launchpad for seeing the world. The organisation sent her to Manila for a leadership training programme and then before she graduated she was recommended to join a service project in the USA as a cultural exchange representative.

At the young age of 21, Merly travelled to 25 states in the US in a span of 15 months.

"I was very naïve having grown up in a sheltered environment. I realised that the world had so many problems," Merly recalls as she observed rampant discrimination and racism.

It was an experience that fuelled Merly's desire to see a more peaceful world.



At the United Nations, NY



With the flags of the UN

"I wanted to see countries living together like one big family, like a global village. I believe that we can live harmoniously even if we come from different cultures, traditions and religions... We shouldn't be divided by boundaries of our creed and ideology, but live based on what we have in common: love, family, sisterhood, brotherhood. There is a world where we can all find happiness," expresses Merly, putting words to her dream.

Merly stayed on in the US. But after 15 years working with the UN and NGOs listening to global problems, she saw a huge gap and ineffectiveness between UN policies and implementation on the ground. She didn't see the UN's global goals being realised anywhere.

"The purpose of the United Nations is to maintain peace and, along the way, promote development. When I went to my village and any community around the world that dream of the United Nations was not being felt," laments Merly in an interview published by The Earth and I.*



Working for a world...



with no war...



*no resentment, no
anger...*

"Out of my frustration I gave up my house and the comfort of living in a First World country, resigned from my job and told my boss that I wanted to go back to the Philippines," says Merly.

With the support of her husband, who continued to work in the US, she took her four children back to the village where she was born.

"There is no shortage of brilliant ideas and money and power in the UN where 193 countries come together to build a world of peace and poverty alleviation. But something was missing and from my frustration at not seeing programmes being implemented, I went back to experiment and document a development framework," she says.



Merly educating youth leaders

Merly created a ten-year community development framework to apply the agenda developed at the macro level down to the provincial level.

During those 10 years in the Philippines, she was able to understand how to implement UN policies and dreams, and make both national and local level stakeholders (senators, congressmen, governors, mayors, counsellors) as well as other sectors (the education sector, women and youth, and the community) understand the vision of the UN and what policies are available and align the local governments to the global UN development agenda.

It was hard work, risky and exhausting. Her children saw her cry often. She faced local bureaucracy, a lack of understanding, hesitation, defensiveness, fear of change and fear of the unknown.

But she plodded through and by year four Merly started to get people onboard and found cooperation.



A bridge must be built to connect macro plans to the micro level

"It was the most fulfilling, rewarding thing I ever did," reflects Merly, marvelling at her self-discovery. "I found what I was looking for. If you want something that is precious, you have to pay the price. I cried and risked my life. But if I didn't do it, I wouldn't be effective. I wouldn't know what to do with my responsibilities back here in New York."

It was clear to Merly that the expectations of the UN and the NGOs it works closely with were not aligned.

NGOs come with assumptions, judgement, are very vocal about what they want and demand accountability from the UN.

On the other hand, the UN expects NGOs to present proposals with a track record of best practice, to have a longer-term view and more sustainable projects and programmes.

"I now understand these two worlds with both frustration and wonderment," states Merly. Her work in the Philippines helps her understand the third part of the triangle. Having lived in the local community, she is now able to develop fine-tuned programmes that are more engaging, relatable, in a language the recipients understand.



Merly (second from left) with mayors of the Philippines at the UN SDG Action Weekend

Merly makes sure that whenever she hears an issue being discussed at the UN it should already have a clear streamline of systems to trickle down to community level.* But she also recognises that there is a need to invest in human talent to make the UN agenda of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) a reality.

The UN was investing financial and human resources only at the national level, not at the provincial and municipal level where education, communication and project management skills are needed, especially amongst the youth.

She believes that a bridge must be built to connect her macro plans to the micro level. This would entail a lot of funding to educate, empower, and equip local community leaders with the necessary knowledge, skills and tools to be able to manage and co-own the UN SDG vision.*

The Agenda for 2030 Sustainable Development was adopted by all UN Member States in 2015. It provides a shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet, now and into the future.

At the heart of the 2030 Agenda are the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which are an urgent call for action by all countries - developed and developing - in a global partnership. They recognise that ending poverty and other deprivations must go hand-in-hand with strategies that improve health and education, reduce inequality, and spur economic growth – all while tackling climate change and working to preserve our oceans and forests.



At the SDG Action Weekend

But the challenge to attain the UN 17 SDGs by 2030 remains. Last year, countries realised that while they were half-way through the target timeline, they were nowhere near where they should be. Several new initiatives to “rescue” the SDGs were hatched.

One initiative is the Pact for the Future, which aims to address global challenges like climate change, inequality, and conflict. It includes digital cooperation and the governance of Technology and AI.

Another initiative that hopes to fast track the SDGs is the New Agenda for Peace. To succeed, Member States must go beyond lip service and invest politically and financially.

Family and community support

Merly is clear that she wouldn’t be able to live her purpose without the unfailing encouragement and support of her husband, Mar Barlaan. Her four children, now aged 13-20, also developed an understanding of Merly’s work commitment which requires her to travel.



Merly with her supportive husband, Mar



Her children understand her commitment, too

“I still feel guilty about being an absentee mother sometimes, so I invest time waking up early to prepare breakfast and the kids’ packed lunch for school. I want my children to feel my love and support for them, and though I feel it is never enough, I do what I can,” she says.

Merly was not the only one who benefited from her local community stint back home. “Because of my children’s experience in the Philippines, they understand. They saw me cry, they saw me lecture, they saw my highs and lows. They lived with young locals. They served in church. They feel natural in the service space, and I appreciate how they are public-minded.”

Sociable and a natural networker, Merly was introduced to Women of the World (WOW) through a fellow Filipina whom she met at the UN Commission Status of Women. There was a scholarship available to women in policy and Merly was offered a place in the WOW coaching programme. During the programme, she was struggling to put together a new project.

“I received coaching about how to pitch it professionally but also in a manner that was personal and spiritual. My proposal highlighted the inner potential of women, their doubts and fears, and their ability to tap into their greatness and clarify their strengths and use this to solve social and global problems.” It was a fresh approach vs the traditional, diplomatic, sometimes clinical proposals that the UN was exposed to.





Merly with WOW Founder Isa Buencamino



Merly (second from right) gathering for a selfie at the WOW Soiree in New York, 2024

"I want to see a world with no wars, with no resentment, no anger. I'd love to create an education programme for young people, to show them an ideal community, like a lab, a peace village. So that when they become world leaders 20 – 30 years from now they will never think of war as an option," Merly continues to dream.

"Every single child that is born is destined to his/her greatness and we need to nurture these children. People focus too much on money, power and recognition. We need to switch and invest in children and young people."



We need to invest in young people

Merly is translating her dream into action and will start a project in the Middle East in 2025.

"I want to see one global family under God/Allah, where there is interdependence, mutual prosperity, love, mutual values. There needs to be reconciliation through forgiveness and healing. Young women will be our peace ambassadors who will lead us into a peaceful future."

Her life's philosophy is to "Live by example. Peace begins with me."

I recall one of my favourite mass hymns that we often sang in my grade school days in a Catholic school. Penned in 1955, here are some lines of the song:

"Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me..."

Let me walk with my brother in perfect harmony.

Let peace begin with me, let this be the moment now.

With ev'ry step I take, let this be my solemn vow"

Merly Barlaan is this song personified.

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*Climate Ambition Summit 2023: SDG Programs are Lagging. By Jerry Chesnut and Christoph Wilkening, The Earth and I

Images courtesy of Merly Barlaan and WOW

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