

The Sidewalk She Calls “Home”

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One day, while I was on my way home, I passed by the shanty near our place in Manila. There, I literally ran into the usual overwhelming number of street children running around and playing on the sidewalks, while their parents lazily lounged around displaying some trinkets or snacks for sale by the sidewalk, or were doing laundry. It just seems they were always doing laundry, albeit because of the many children they have.

Then, all of a sudden, this girl cut in front of me while I was walking. I asked her name, and she said it was Gina. I saw her and her siblings run around and play on these sidewalks whenever I passed by. They were quite a naughty bunch, screaming and playing, unmindful of the pedestrians who had a look of disdain whenever they were cut off by them.

Having a few minutes of free time on my hands, I decided to make an impromptu interview of Gina and her other siblings. She was the second eldest among them, but seemingly the most mature of them all. I asked her about what she does everyday, and she looked at me with puzzlement. Then she told me she just spends time with her siblings, not able to elaborate on what activities they do.

As we continued our little one-on-one conversation, Gina looked to her side, and then suddenly ran off, only to return in a moment's notice with a younger girl. I asked Gina who was she. She said she is Leny, her younger sister. I decided to ask Leny the same questions I have been asking Gina. Not to my surprise, I received the same look of puzzlement from her. This time, Leny did not even give a response to my question. I am not sure whether she understood me or just had nothing to say, as she seemed to be the quieter of the two.

Later, a boy, seemingly a little older than Gina, literally came into the picture while I was talking to Gina. He was jumping around and staring at me, while looking curiously at what I was talking to Gina about. I asked him who he was. He said his name was Patrick, and that he was Gina's older brother. He was quite the hyperactive one, a bundle full of energy, as opposed to his more subdued sister.

Again for the sake of comparison with his other siblings, I asked Patrick what he does everyday. He excitedly told me that he builds houses! I looked around the area to see what he was talking about. Upon not finding any semblance of a construction site, I asked him where the houses that he built were. He pointed to a pile of plywood by the sidewalk. I then just smiled at him. After a while, Patrick suddenly left, maybe because he became bored, and went off to where his younger sister Leny was, and played tag with her.

As the day wore on, it was getting late. But before leaving, I asked Gina where the rest of her family was. She said her father is out earning a living as a Peditaxi driver. She then pointed to a bench a bit away where two women were, each holding a baby. She told me the one on the right was her mother, and the baby was their youngest. Finally, she pointed to the rather large elderly woman by the sidewalk washing a huge number of clothes, which she said was her grandmother doing all of the family's laundry. Gina's mother and

grandmother also earn some money on the side, selling cigarettes, candies, and some snacks by the sidewalk.

As I bid the children goodbye and went home, I thought to myself what will become of these children once they grew up. More likely, they will not finish secondary school, let alone go to college. Many of the children in their situation grow up to become petty thieves, drug users, or worse victims of physical and sexual abuse by others. Only time will tell, as everyday, Gina and her family continues on, wondering what awaits them from the sidewalk they call home.