

2018 International Essay Contest for Young People

[Youth Category – 1st Prize]

Engineering for the People

(Original)

Kent Harry Perez Cumpio

(Age 22, The Philippines)

University of the Philippines

In my country, everyone wants me to leave. My parents, friends, and relatives all say the same thing: “Leave the Philippines once you graduate and get a high-paying job abroad. Don’t waste your talents. There aren’t any opportunities here.” All young Filipinos know this advice: study hard so you can get into the best university in Manila and it would be easier to leave from there.

I took this advice to heart because I have faced poverty myself. I know how it feels to eat nothing but rice for lunch because your parents don’t have the money to buy meat. I know how it feels to attend a Christmas party in school wearing a worn-out shirt while the rest of your classmates are wearing new clothes. As a young kid, I had a deep-seated desire for a better life, and when my teacher told us that we could someday become rich if we studied hard and aced our exams, I believed her.

Studying became my passion since then. I was the valedictorian in grade school and won many awards. Later on, I was admitted to the country’s best science high school where many graduates proceed to the country’s top universities. I was filled with much pride knowing that I came closer to my goal. Every day I would remind myself why I was doing all these: I am studying because I want to leave the country and get a better life.

But in college, I learned to rethink my life choices. It is where I was faced with a diversity of ideas that challenged my own. I can never forget what my social science professor told us: “This university is funded by the public so we can use our education to help the country. But many of our graduates forget this the moment they get their



diplomas. Instead of helping the country's poor, they work in foreign lands to get high wages. They use their education to enrich themselves. And when they return to the Philippines, they are quick to complain that the country remains poor! Ask yourselves, what have you done to help the country? And who will help the country's poor when all of you are gone?"

It was a turning point for me. I realized that education has a much deeper purpose. It is not simply about learning how to solve textbook problems or acing exams. Its purpose is not to enrich ourselves with material wealth, but to learn to question why we're obsessed with material wealth to begin with. We must learn to see the bigger picture and ask the tough questions. What is our role in society and how can we use our education to help?

I became one of the founding members of Engineers Without Borders – Diliman, hoping to use my engineering education to help the country's poor. This is the first humanitarian engineering organization on campus. We want to let people know that engineering is not just about working in large factories. It is also about building water filters in rural areas, or designing better tools for cleaning polluted rivers. My project was to build small biodigesters that convert food waste into gas for cooking and heating. I wanted to prove that we do not need complicated concepts to make a difference in people's lives. Even the application of simple scientific concepts can have a huge impact.

I no longer want to leave the country. When I graduate, I want to improve my expertise on building biodigesters and teach communities how this technology works. I want to use my writing skills to propose legislation to one of our Senators so we can soon have a national biodigester programme. This project can help farmers and households save on costs. Instead of buying expensive gas, families can generate their own fuel at home from food and animal waste.

Through my civic activities, I want to convince my fellow youth to stay and tell them that there's more to life than the pursuit of money. We have a people to serve and a nation to build. We ought to ask ourselves: Who will help the country's poor when all of us have left?