

# Surviving the Storm

**One woman's story shows how an urban poor community is adapting and becoming more resilient to the hazards that threaten their chosen resettlement site**

BY ANANEZA ABAN

**With only tough arms to rely on, Edna Militar swam the murky and flooded fishpond near Batasan river in Tanza, Navotas while pushing a *balsa* (an improvised Styrofoam raft) to bring her children to safety. Typhoon Florita, the storm that came in July 2006, shaped memories of surviving a disaster for Edna, who lives in a temporary shelter built in a resettlement site in the low-lying coastal barangay of Tanza, Navotas.**

Edna, a mother and a grandmother, could hardly believe how she braved the wind which almost blew away her roof made of rusty galvanized iron sheets salvaged from a demolished shanty they used to own in Letre, Malabon.



PHOTOS BY ANANEZA ABAN

Edna Militar's house has survived six typhoons so far. The bamboo supports are a big help.

Occasionally pressing her chest while squatting on her shack's wooden flooring, Edna recounted her first encounter of a typhoon in Tanza: *"Umiyak talaga ako nung unang-una dahil nagsisigawan na ang mga anak ko. Kasi parang binabakbak na yung bubong namin. Inangat talaga yung yero namin, wala na kaming matulugan, kaya lumikas na kami."*

Aside from the strong winds, Edna had another reason to be worried. Floodwaters had broken through the embankments surrounding the reclaimed fishponds of the resettlement area. The water rose to more than a meter from the ground, flooding the lower portion of Edna's temporary shelter, as well as the houses of about 87 families in the resettlement site.

She panicked when the whistling wind made her empty water jugs thump in her kitchen and her grandchildren started wailing in terror. At once, she and her husband Eddie decided to evacuate their children to a nearby public school. That day, her swimming skills which she honed during her childhood years in her hometown in Catarman, Samar, became useful for Edna.

Pushing the *balsa* with one hand while paddling the floodwaters using the other, she successfully brought her children to dry ground. She was grateful that she had a huge Styrofoam board that she got from a kind elderly man who lives across the Batasan river to use as a *balsa*. She and her family spent four days in the public school, waiting for the weather to calm down.

## Elevated houses

It was a good thing that Edna and most of her neighbors built their houses on stilts, as recommended by their people's organization, Samahan ng Nagkakaisang Maralita sa Navotas (SANAGMANA) following advise from the architects of TAO-Pilipinas. The main level of these elevated houses were spared from the flood. Luckily, despite using recycled materials such as old wooden planks and used wooden posts and beams, the houses only needed minor repair after the storm.

Typhoons Florita, Glenda, Henry, Maria and Juan visited the Philippines respectively in July and August this year. During Typhoon Glenda, the settlers in Tanza did not bother to evacuate. Mariano De Veyra, SANAGMANA president, told them to stay on, believing that their houses would not be destroyed based on their experience in the first storm. Confident of their power to survive, Edna and the rest stayed. This time, they were unfazed by the storm.

It was the neighboring communities who got scared for them. Another woman resident said: *"Nung pangalawang bagyo, yung mga tao sa kabila natatakot sa ginawa namin. Tinanong kami kung bakit hindi pa kami lumikas. Sabi namin okay lang, tama na yun,"* referring to the first evacuation. They preferred to stay in their own homes, because many of their children got sick in the school turned evacuation center.

## Challenges in resettling

Edna and her family used to live in Letre, Malabon, until their house was demolished by the government. Deciding to live in Tanza was difficult in the beginning, according to Edna. The resettlement area is not yet developed; there are no roads going to the sites. Residents get to the site by crossing over a makeshift bamboo bridge built over a fishpond, or by riding a banca. Water is scarce in the community, with residents getting water from a common storage tank.

With hardly enough money to pay a carpenter, Edna and her husband built their house themselves. She's not only a homemaker, but technically a builder of her dwelling as well. Edna had learned carpentry as a kid by watching her father construct their house. *"Ako ang nagpanday ng bahay*



A wide view of the Tanza resettlement site. The houses are temporary structures built by families whose houses were recently demolished.

*ko, kasama ko ang asawa ko kasi wala naman kaming pambayad sa panday. Natuto ako sa tatay ko kasi tinitingnan ko siya nung ako'y maliit pa. Nung namatay ang tatay ko, ako na ang gumagawa ng bahay-bahay doon sa probinsya."*

For Edna and her family, adapting to the strong wind and flood that come with every typhoon in Tanza and remain steadfast under a storm is a must. She feels that she and her family have no other place to go. Surviving in Tanza is Edna's only means for a better shelter. *"Hindi pa rin ako aalis dito kasi wala naman kaming pupuntahan. Kung sakaling masama talaga ang panahon, isasakay ko na lang sa balsa ang mga anak ko. Ako ang magtutulak, maglalangoy ako. Kahit wala kaming makuhang gamit, basta ma-safety ko lang sila."*

### Blessings from the storm

After the storm, Edna tried to make her small home more resilient to typhoons, relying on her own instinct and wisdom. She noticed that the winds blew off a portion of the plywood walls of the ground floor (below the elevated main floor). Instead of repairing it, she removed the remaining walls to let the wind flow more freely. She also placed bamboo frames diagonally across her house posts so that the house could withstand the wind.



Due to the frequency of floods in the site, the community organization has decided to create a materials recovery facility (a building for storing garbage that can be recycled) that can float. Big pipes were placed under the building frame to make it buoyant.

The residents of Tanza have also found ways to take advantage of the storms. The women harvest rainwater by connecting bamboo shafts to the roof. Edna's house has two small elevated platforms on opposite sides of her front door. These platforms hold the plastic drums used for rainwater storage. She uses the collected rainwater for laundry and other washing purposes in the household.

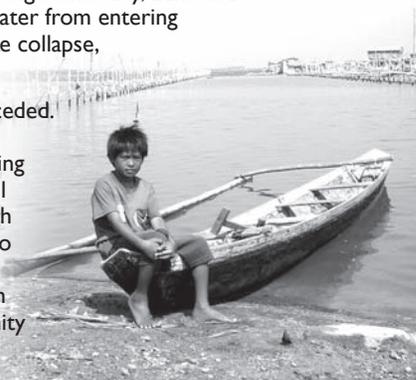
Seeing the brighter side of living in waters, during the storm, the residents also found crabs, shrimps, and fish such as tilapia and bangus from the nearby fishponds while swimming in their flooded area. With a scant budget for a sumptuous meal on the table, the residents had fun harvesting and cooking the seafood.

Adults and children were also forced to learn how to swim. Margelina Brusilo, a non-swimmer, said that she was forced by circumstance to learn otherwise she would not have transported her children to safety during the typhoon.

This side of Navotas being very near Manila Bay, the threat of disaster still haunts the community. One day while walking along the nearby fishponds along Manila Bay, Edna and

the others saw a crack on the dike that prevents sea water from entering the fishponds. Somebody told them that should the dike collapse, sea water could inundate their settlement.

But for now, the tempest is gone. Floodwaters have receded. Tanza's picturesque horizon has turned skyblue again, contrasting with the dark feathered migratory birds flying in flocks on a sunny day. Edna's husband goes out to sell vegetables. The children go to school. It was already high noon when Edna finished her story, so she went back to her kitchen. The other women were doing the laundry, cooking food and looking after their children. Even with the threats that they face, a simple life for this community goes on.



## The Morning After Milenyo

The resettlement community faced another challenge when Typhoon Milenyo struck Metro Manila. According to SANAGMANA's president, Mariano de Veyra, about 20 of the 87 houses in the site were severely damaged by the strong winds. But nobody got injured or hurt because most of the families were able to evacuate before the storm hit. The families evacuated to the nearby Navotas High School Tanza Annex like they did during Typhoon Florita in July. The next day most of them returned to the site and started rebuilding their houses.

According to Edna, she evacuated her children to the school, but chose to stay behind to guard their belongings. Her husband was out selling vegetables. During the height of the storm she recounts, *"Halos hindi na ako makatayo sa loob ng bahay. Noong natatanggal na ang bubong, nagpumilit ako bumaba, pero hindi ako makagalaw dahil sa lakas ng hangin."* When she was finally able to get down, the wind blew off their roof. Fortunately she was able to seek shelter in a friend's house. Although their roof got blown off, fortunately their house remained standing, only tilting a bit to the side. Of the six pieces of galvanized iron sheets that they had, she was able to salvage only four. Up to now she says they have trouble sleeping when it rains, because their roof still leaks. They are having a difficult time making ends meet because her husband wasn't able to sell vegetables after the typhoon. But even with this difficult situation, she still wants to stay in the site. *"Kahit ganun ang nangyari, nasanay na kami. Basta ang mga bata nakaligtas. Pagtitiyagaan na lang namin."*



Typhoon Milenyo wrecked about 20 percent of the makeshift houses in the site. PHOTO FROM SANAGMANA