In the Philippines, De La Salle University-Dasmariñas transforms the lives of young Rohingya refugees

"Where the heart finds a home" is the title of the latest story released by De La Salle University-Dasmariñas, in video format, as part of the *Lasallian Mission Festival* being held this week, with the aim of reflecting on how **the Lasallian Mission continues to transform lives, especially those of people affected by conflict and displacement**.

"More than a series of activities, the Festival is an invitation to renew our commitment to the Lasallian Mission: to build communities that uphold human dignity, promote inclusion and respond concretely to the needs of the times", says the director of the Lasallian Mission, Jose Ritche. In this regard, he adds, "the stories of Ash and Lio were shared as powerful testimonies of hope, resilience and support, reminding us that **the Lasallian Mission goes beyond the classroom and is realised in the way we welcome, support and empower others**".

Indeed, the short film – lasting 13 minutes and 2 seconds, in English – tells the story **of Shafiul Kader (Lio) and Asmatullah (Ash), two young men originally from Myanmar who migrated to Malaysia as children**, together with their families, fleeing persecution and violence against the Rohingya.

A stateless and persecuted community

The Rohingya conflict has left the community stateless and exposed to persecution. **In 2017, military violence forced more than 700,000 Rohingya to flee to Bangladesh**.



"When I was around seven years old, I moved to Malaysia with my parents",

recalls Lio. “So I studied there. I finished my high school. When I was little, I wanted to be a footballer. I was inspired by Lionel Messi, the greatest player of all time. And since then I’ve loved watching football and playing football. But **since I don’t have a country, I let that dream go away**”.

“When there was war going in 2017, all of my relatives had to flee the country and migrate to Bangladesh”, Lio continues. “So all of them are currently in the Bangladesh refugee camps. And life there is very hard. When I think of it… I feel very devastating (…). **A few families use one single toilet (…) and they are under tents. When it is raining the soil becomes very muddy**”.

Ash, for his part, emigrated to Malaysia when he was very young, at around five or six years old. “I didn’t know much about the things that were going on in Myanmar”, he says. **“I did ask my parents why we came here. They all said it was because of the war going on.** So everyone just wants to save their own life”.

The language barrier was one of his first challenges: “When I newly came it was very hard because I wanted to communicate with the locals. They used to bully us (…). So whenever we went to play football, they say we can’t play there because we were not from that country (…). We faced a lot of difficulties, like bullies and criticism, but then, **by the time we grew up, we started learning their language and making friends with them**. They started accepting us, but not everyone”.

A glimmer of hope through education



Ash

The Rohingya remain one of the largest stateless groups in the world, and some countries offer them refuge but not full citizenship. However, Lio and Ash did not lose hope and **joined the *Complementary Pathways* (CPath) programme in the Philippines, promoted by the United Nations**, to provide some Rohingya refugees displaced in Southeast Asia with a safe and regulated pathway to admission

and residence in the Philippines through education, so that their protection needs and basic rights can be met.

"It was the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) that contacted various universities in the Philippines, including Columban College and De La Salle Brothers, Inc. (DLSBI)", says Jose Ritche. "From this initial network, the initiative grew into a consortium now known as *Pathways Pilipinas*, a group of educational institutions implementing the CPath Programme in the Philippines", of which De La Salle University-Damariñas** is a member.

"When I heard about this programme, I was so happy because I felt I had the chance to change my future", says Ash enthusiastically. "I want to break that cycle, the cycle of being a refugee. I come from a family where no one had ever gone to university before. So **I am the first in my family to get a university degree, here at my university**".

Lio, for his part, says, "I am very grateful for this opportunity I have been given. It is very rare. And **the Philippines is the only country that has awarded scholarships to Rohingya refugees in Malaysia and Bangladesh**. When I finish my studies, I hope to be able to give something back to the La Salle community", he says.

As *CPath* programme scholarship holders, Lio and Ash **receive support from De La Salle University-Damariñas to pursue their higher education**, along with a monthly allowance for living expenses, participation in other development programmes and free accommodation in their university halls of residence.

"When our University accepted the invitation to join the initiative, it recognised an ever-growing call to embrace inclusion and diversity. The Rohingya refugees are the largest and most severely affected group to have been stripped of their citizenship and persecuted", says the director of the Lasallian Mission.

Together as one Lasallian Family

By participating in the study programmes on offer, young Rohingya people are not only integrated into the high-quality educational environment provided by the University, but are also welcomed with warmth and fraternity, and are encouraged to rethink their lives and dream big. That is why "their stories form part of this year's Lasallian Mission Festival, offering the community **a living testimony of what it means to make hope a reality: together, as one Lasallian family**," emphasises Jose Ritche.


Lio

Lio aspires to become an IT specialist. With his training, he hopes to secure a well-paid job "because I want to support myself and my family". "I'm going to study hard and make them proud". "**My dream is to bring my whole family together in one place (...) in Malaysia, somewhere**. To achieve that, I have to earn a lot of money. And then, of course, obtain citizenship in any country. I think the only thing we lack compared to others, those who have a country, is freedom – the freedom of movement to go to other countries. As we are refugees, we cannot travel abroad".

Ash wants to work as a data analyst. "**I'm** also **thinking about setting up my own business**". Through his work, he hopes to have enough resources to look after his parents: "They've given me so much and I'd like to give something back to them. They've always supported me and always given me everything I wanted, even though there were times when we had financial problems (...). I'll try to help as much as possible".

"Keep dreaming", "study and work hard", "support my family and my community". Lio and Ash's stories are moving and inspiring. They know **they have the whole De La Salle University-Dasmariñas community behind them as they write a new chapter in their stories**.

"Help those in need and make them feel proud. And believe in yourself. Of course you can do it. **It doesn't matter where you come from. Just believe in God too and keep working hard**", is Lio's advice.

“Take life seriously. Remember that there are people counting on you. Your parents, your siblings and the rest of your family are counting on you. And don’t forget your school, your teachers. They have always believed in you. So make everyone proud”, adds Ash.

Amid the conflict that continues to affect their people, the Rohingya cling to the hope that one day they may find **a place to call home**. A home like the one they have found at La Salle, where “everything is connected”, including shared dreams.

We invite you to watch the video produced by De La Salle University-Dasmariñas:

* *The Lasallian Mission Festival is the University’s annual celebration of its Lasallian identity, bringing together the entire academic community in a shared experience of faith, service and fellowship. Based on the theme “Fratres in Unum: Faith in communion, mission in action”, LMF 2026 highlights that* ***our mission is lived out most meaningfully in relationships – with God and with one another – especially with the marginalised****.*

** *Currently, the Pathways Pilipinas consortium comprises De La Salle Philippines (De La Salle Brothers, Inc.) – through its Social Action Unit (SAU), which acts as*

the network's coordinator – De La Salle Araneta University, University of St. La Salle, De La Salle University–Dasmariñas, Columban College Incorporated, San Beda University, St. Louis University and Tarlac State University.

Article written in collaboration with De La Salle University-Dasmariñas.