



The fashion show of Ingrid Tuaño's dressmaking business, MIST Couture, was one of the highlights of her birthday fundraiser. Ingrid is shown here (center) closing the show.

PAYING IT FORWARD

A breast cancer survivor turned her 50th birthday into a fundraiser for the benefit of others with critical illnesses.

PHOTOS FROM PHILIPPINE AIRLINES (PAL) flight purser Maria Ingrid Santillan Tuaño's 50th birthday party on August 6, 2016 show a love-filled gathering of family and friends. They are images worth sharing, just as the inspiring story behind the celebration.

Having learned that she had breast cancer just 14 months earlier, Ingrid resolved to throw this party for two reasons: First, to give thanks for another year added to her life. "That's a blessing, for one. Kasi umabot ako ng fifty," she says. And second, to raise funds for three former colleagues who were also fighting critical illnesses, but were not doing as well as she was. "This was a way of thanking God, and giving back all the blessings that I received."

Like most persons affected by cancer, Ingrid found herself in a tight spot after she was diagnosed in June 2015. Then 48 years old, with two teen daughters and a son barely into puberty, Ingrid was determined to recover. However, the cycles of chemotherapy came at a hefty price. It didn't help that her cancer turned out to be HER2-positive, which means it was more aggressive than other types of breast cancer, and thus required her to take an extra round of specialized treatment.

Moreover, her eldest daughter, Kyla, takes her own set of medications for epilepsy. "Hindi ko nga pinroblema yung sakit ko. Ang pinroblema ko, saan ako kukuha nung P3 million," recalls Ingrid, alluding to the cost of Herceptin, the notoriously expensive medicine that targets HER2-positive breast cancer.

But things worked out favorably for Ingrid. Help poured in from her employer and fellow cabin crew members, and she was able to successfully request for financial assistance from organizations like the Philippine Charity Sweepstakes Office (PCSO) and Roche, the pharmaceutical company that distributes Herceptin in the country. At the time of the party, she was in the last phase of treatment for breast cancer.

This was the same sort of kindness that Ingrid wanted to extend to the three former colleagues she handpicked as beneficiaries of her 50th birthday celebration. She had initially wanted it to be a more intimate affair, with a "mini-fashion show" of the designs of MIST Couture, the dressmaking business she established earlier that year. But with the help of her friends—and a lot of prayers—it evolved into a grand affair that surpassed all her expectations.

"Nung July, I was thinking of a small celebration lang talaga. Pero naisip ko, mas maganda nga siguro kung gawin kong fundraising. Once ka lang naman mabubuhay sa mundo, at least you lived with purpose. And then yung friends ko nag-express na ng support. Sabi nila, 'Sige, tutulungan ka namin.' Tapos 'yun na, ang dami nang tumulong."

With barely a month to plan, friends pooled their resources to organize a program. One offered to print tickets; another offered the use of the venue for free; those who were connected to corporations pulled in sponsorships for various parts of the program; and another, Mariza Buhay Ketcher, an artist, sold her paintings and contributed part of the proceeds to the cause. "I think, siguro nga kasi I was asking for guidance, that God was guiding me to them," says Ingrid.

She continues, "Hindi 'to magiging possible without them. Ang sinagot ko lang talaga is yung pagkain, kasi ayoko na kunin sa tickets yung pambayad sa food. Gusto ko kung ano yung makukuhang amount sa ticket sales, i-di-divide talaga sa kanilang tatlo (beneficiaries)."

The intent was to raise P100,000 for each beneficiary, but the outpouring of support—including a generous donation from Ramon Ang, business tycoon and former part-owner of PAL—helped Ingrid give each of them a little more. "Siguro talagang blessing lang, nag-over pa ako sa iniisip kong amount. I was able to give P125,000 each." After the party, Ingrid personally visited each beneficiary's home to turn over her gift.

Inspired by the success of her fundraiser, Ingrid says she will continue to look for ways to help those in need, especially her fellow cancer patients. One sure way is through her business, MIST Couture. "When I opened my shop, I made a promise that thirty percent of its income will go to cancer patients talaga," she says.

Beyond that, she isn't sure how else she can help, but is committed to finding out. "When I accepted this fate na binigay sa 'kin ni God, sabi ko parang meron talaga akong mission. Until now nag-se-search ako kung ano talaga 'yun, pero little by little, pinapakita sa 'kin na eto 'yun."

MIST Couture is at Unit C San Antonio Building, Palanca Street, BF Homes, Parañaque City. For inquiries, call (632) 925-8242, or search M I S T Couture under Pages on Facebook.