

He Clung to a Piece of Wood

JESUS Gica feels he is living a second life.

The 41-year-old truck driver of Norkis Group of Companies was one of the first survivors to surface from the wreck of MV Princess of the Stars. He was found alive on Sibuyan island hours after the ship sank.

Late Wednesday afternoon, Gica returned home to his family.

He said there are two things he will always remember about his ordeal: the piece of wood that kept him afloat and the fisherman who pulled him to shore.

But when Gica, along with two other Norkis employees, boarded MV Princess of the Stars in Manila on June 20, he said the weather was still warm. There was no sign of the storm.

It was “a beautiful night,” Gica said in Bisaya.

He said he and his companions had a good sleep on their individual bunks inside the enclosed, air-conditioned tourist area, second from the top floor.

When they woke up at 6:00 a.m. the next day, the ship was already near Romblon. Gica said they had a pleasant breakfast in what he described was a beautiful morning.

Strong waves began rocking the ship at 8:30 a.m. But because the swaying eventually ceased, the sea marshals assured them they were safe.

“*Huwag na kayo mag-alala; nalampasan na ang bagyo* (Don’t worry, we’ve passed the storm),” Gica quoted the sea marshals as saying.

An hour later, however, the waves picked up again. This time, the ship’s rocking did not stop.

From 9:30 a.m. until noon, Gica said, the wind was very strong and the waves rose higher than the ship. The waves were as big as houses, he said.

This prompted the ship’s crew to advise passengers to wear life vests at 10:00 a.m. According to Gica, there were about 100 passengers in the 5th floor tourist-class room and each of them had a



MV Princess of the Stars capsized off Sibuyan Island in Romblon, Philippines on June 21, 2008. It left hundreds of passengers dead at sea. Days later, a dozen survivors were found and rescued. This story was published on June 27, 2008 after the homecoming of Jesus Gica, one of the fortunate survivors of the year's worst Philippine naval tragedy.

life vest on.

At 11:30 a.m., the crew asked the passengers to get out of their cabins and bunks. Gica and his companions went out of the tourist room to the balcony outside.

Some passengers, especially the women and the elderly, however, feared going outside. The wind was so strong it swept them away. An old woman slipped on the wet floor and hit her head on the railing. The fall caused the back of her head to bleed.

Gica said that even as one side of the ship began to sink, the ship's engine and electricity were still functioning.

And as the ship slowly sank, life rafts were released, prayers were said and screams for help rang out from the different floors of the vessel.

When Gica and his two companions jumped, the sea was already filled with passengers.

Gica saw a plank of wood painted blue that looked like a piece from one of the vessel's benches. He and his companions clung to it but a wave separated them. He later found the wood again, but not his companions.

He also found an old woman and shared the plank of wood with her. Another wave hit them and when he saw her again, she was already dead.

Gica said he floated on the piece of wood and hoped the waves would bring him to shore. Countless times, a wave pushed him underwater but he surfaced because of his life vest. Each time he surfaced after being submerged, he would find the plank of wood.

After five hours of floating, Gica saw the mountains of Sibuyan, and a wave slammed him against a rock. Though he sustained a deep cut in the forehead, he clung to the rock because he already felt like fainting.

That was when a fisherman, who lived in a little hut in Sibuyan, found him and dragged him ashore.

The fisherman fed him, though the only food he had was a bit of rice. Gica said he gobbled up the food even if it had already started to spoil.

The fisherman dressed him and let him sleep. But Gica said he could not rest, because whenever he closed his eyes, he would cry and see the bodies of the sunken vessel's passengers.

Police brought him the next day to the Sibuyan mayor's house.

Gica never got the fisherman's name, but said he gave him the dark blue Norkis sweatshirt that he had worn, since the fisherman said he liked to wear sweatshirts while fishing.

But while Gica's wife, Morena, was all smiles to sit beside her husband yesterday afternoon, Chona Tuston fainted at the Cebu City Sports Complex upon learning that

her husband Arnulfo's body was found dead in San Pascual.

She received a text message from an unidentified person, whom she and her sister called up.

The person said Arnulfo's corpse was found and in one of his pockets was her cellphone number. He was also wearing a wedding ring engraved "Chona".

"Bahala namatay, basta napalغان na (Even if he's dead, at least he has been found)," Chona said when she recovered.

While Morena thanked God for her husband's "second life", Chona said she was grateful that, at least, she has received "clarity," and a body to claim.