

WORD IN ACTION

Going beyond all borders (Part 2)

We continue with two more experiences shared by young people at Genfest 2018.

NO TO WAR

My name is Tommaso. I grew up in Vicenza, a city in northern Italy, where I have lived a mostly peaceful life.

When I was in secondary school I had classmates who came from different countries. I had a good relationship with them, and I suffered when my peers made fun of them or made them feel unwelcome. I wanted to do something to stop this behaviour, but I didn't know how.

In 2014, I went to Jordan, in the Middle East, where I experienced first-hand the consequences of the war. I visited refugee camps and I interacted with people from Syria and Iraq who had to flee from their own countries in order to save their lives. This experience completely changed my life and my perspective of the world. I felt compelled to go back to my own country and spread awareness about the nonsense of war.

Together with a friend, we started a project called '*Non Dalla Guerra*' (*No to war*). We were young, inexperienced and unprepared, but full of energy and the desire to challenge media stereotypes. We started with those around us and, little by little, we brought our message to schools and organizations within our local communities. We were amazed when we realized that people wanted to listen to what we had to say! In fact, during the first year, my friend and I were able to reach more than twenty thousand students.

Our main goal is to educate people about peace by showing them what war really involves and by bringing the reality of war closer to those who have not experienced its atrocities. We share our experiences of what we had witnessed in war-torn countries and how those conflicts are destroying societies, undermining people's hope, freedom and the possibility to build a better future.



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Illustration: Pixabay

Non Dalla Guerra has attracted the attention of thousands of people. We have been able to bring our message to important institutions such as the European Parliament, and we have participated in conferences in different countries around the world. In addition to that, every year we are encouraging many young people to volunteer in projects in collaboration with Caritas. Through these projects, hundreds of youth have interacted with families and people who are living in refugee camps and who have suffered because of the war. And we want to do more!

Being young has not prevented us from carrying forward our ideals. We still make many mistakes but learn from these. We have faced many challenges, and sometimes people would sow seeds of doubt about what we are trying to do, but our commitment to build peace and denounce war has become a passion and part of our lifestyle.

We feel that we have a responsibility — and this responsibility for us has a face, a story and a name — of all the people we have met and who are still struggling because of the absurdity of war.

Through this experience I understood that peace starts with me, and this is a huge challenge!

The most important thing is to respond with our own lives by going out of our comfort zones to meet the needs of humanity. I have realized that we, young people, can change the world. Our contribution may seem small but is fundamental in the construction of a more peaceful and more united world.

A LIVING HOPE

My name is Gabby Cordova and I come from a family who have been running a successful restaurant business for many years in the Philippines. Growing up, I was very self-centred and only cared about my own happiness. In my late secondary school years, I started working in our family restaurant after school. I had money to spend, and I would go out with my friends whenever I could. Soon after, I started to spend less time with my family, and I stopped going to church. In high school, my friends and I went on an island trip to Boracay (one of the most popular tourist destinations here in the Philippines). We went to parties; got drunk, and there I tried marijuana for the first time.

I became involved with gambling in my university years, and even set up an underground poker den with a friend, where we made loads of money. My friends even kept convincing me to try shabu (a powerful drug). Eventually, I succumbed to peer pressure and I became hooked.

My life immediately changed. I lost so much weight and I started to lose all interest in my hobbies and work. My world revolved around taking this drug, which continued to ruin my life and affected my relationships with the people I cared for. In my head, I knew I had to quit—but I couldn't stop.

My family did all they could to help me. They brought me to a rehabilitation centre, and when I left, it didn't take too long for me to get back into the habit again. It became even worse when I started a 'business' with a friend. We opened a club, but I spent whatever money I made on women, binge drinking, and of course, shabu. This was probably the worst time of my life.

One day, one of my brothers implored me, *'Do you not feel any pity for our parents?'*



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I started to think more about other people rather than just myself, and I discovered how wonderful it felt to put myself at their service.

Look at them. They can't sleep for worrying about you, waiting for you to come home. When are you going to stop?!' It hit me hard because I loved my family so much.

I felt ashamed and told my parents that I wanted to return to rehab. My mum heard about 'Fazenda da Esperança,' a centre based on three major pillars: *Spirituality, Community Life and Work*. She strongly believed that only a rehab programme rooted in some form of spirituality would help me.

The first few weeks in Fazenda (farm) were a huge challenge for me. There was no TV, we had to wake up early, and we had to meditate! Not to mention the physical work we had to do on the farm. On some evenings, we would meet together to share how we had tried to live the three pillars of Spirituality, Community Life and Work. I was not used to this, but as the weeks went by, I found these pillars became second-nature to me. Day in and day out, this was our life in Fazenda, and as time passed, I realized that my body was no longer craving for shabu. I started to think more about other people rather than just myself, and I discovered how wonderful it felt to put myself at their service. But most of all, I discovered I had a new relationship with God. I was finally experiencing a deep and real happiness.

I have now finished the programme at the Fazenda, and have returned to my family, who never gave up on me. Every day, I make sure that I spend quality time with them. I'm grateful for this new life and the new hope that Fazenda has given to me, and I want to pass that hope on to others. Two of my companions from Fazenda have come to start a new life in my city, and our family has welcomed them as part of our restaurant team. This has been of great mutual help for one another – we continue to live the Fazenda pillars of spirituality, community life and work, accepting that trouble and problems will still come our way. Together, we have started a 'Group of Living Hope' in my city: a support group for graduates of Fazenda's programme, as well as a venue to welcome and help those who are looking for hope in the midst of addiction. 🌈

