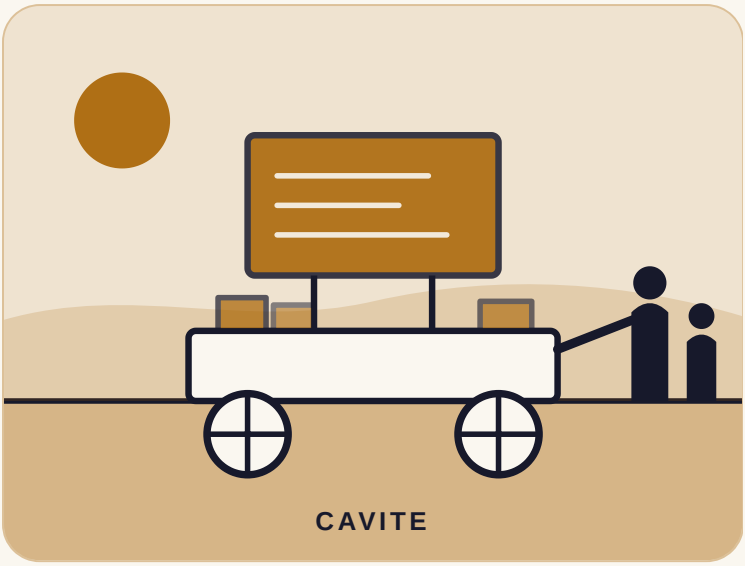

PHILIPPINES

The teen with a classroom on wheels

A bullied teen in the Philippines took books to street children on a pushcart. CNN named him Hero of the Year.

WHERE	Cavite City
WHO	Efren Peñaflorida, a teacher from Cavite City who took school to street children on a pushcart
WHEN	1997 to 2012

4 min read

CHAPTER ONE

The story

Efren Peñaflorida grew up in a slum beside a rubbish dump in Cavite City, in the Philippines. Street gangs were common. Children as young as nine were already in violent fights. At school, Efren was bullied. Street toughs sometimes beat him.

School scholarships and a youth group called Club 8586 helped him. In 1997, at 16, he and two friends started their own group, the Dynamic Teen Company. Its aim was to pull other teens away from gangs.

> **I realized I could turn a bad experience into something positive.**
>
> EFREN PEÑAFLORIDA, QUOTED BY GMA NEWS

A classroom on wheels

At first, they walked through the shantytowns with plastic bags full of books and school supplies. Later they used a pedicab. Then they built the “kariton”, a pushcart with a mini-library, a blackboard, and folding tables and chairs. On Saturdays they held classes in cemeteries and beside rubbish dumps.

Classes were short, about 15 minutes of reading, writing and good values. Many children first came for the bread. Soon they stayed for the books.

Not everyone welcomed them. People shouted “trash collectors” at the volunteers. Some parents refused, preferring their children to beg. The group answered with more teaching, and started a reading class for the parents too.

9,000

people nominated for CNN Heroes in 2009, from over 100 countries

2.75 million

online votes for him in seven weeks

85–90%

of the children served went back to school, the group said in 2012

A hero of the year

In 2009, Club 8586 nominated him for CNN Heroes. A panel chose 28 heroes from the 9,000 nominees. On 22 November 2009, after 2.75 million online votes, Efren was named CNN Hero of the Year. The prize was $100,000 for his group, on top of $25,000 for reaching the top ten. He said a vote for him was a vote for the poor children the group taught and for its volunteers.

He had studied education, as a way of paying forward the help he had received. He was then a young teacher in Cavite, and he kept running pushcart classes on weekends. In 2012, the group said its pushcart classrooms served about 800 children. It said 85 to 90 percent of them had gone back to school.

How it unfolded

1997	At 16, Efren and two friends start the Dynamic Teen Company.
2009	Club 8586 nominates him. CNN picks 28 heroes from 9,000 nominees.
Oct	CNN names him one of ten finalists.
Nov	He is named CNN Hero of the Year on 22 November.
2012	The group says it serves about 800 children.

CHAPTER TWO

What makes it special

He did not wait for children to come to a school. He took the school to where they already were.

Bread opened the door, but learning kept the children coming back.

OUR TAKE

Efren answered bullying and poverty with teaching, one pushcart at a time.

CHAPTER THREE

What we can learn

1. **Turn pain into purpose**
   Efren was bullied as a child, and he chose to help other children.
   Try this: Write down one hard thing you lived through. Ask who it could help you serve.

2 Go where people are

He took books to cemeteries, dumps and shantytowns instead of waiting.

Try this: Take your help to one place where people already are this week.

3 Start with what you have

The first classes used plastic bags of books. The pushcart came later.

Try this: Begin with one bag, one hour and one person. Improve it as you go.

4 Answer doubt with patience

When some parents refused, the group started a reading class for them too.

Try this: When someone opposes you, ask what they need and invite them in.

ONE THOUGHT TO TAKE AWAY

A classroom can be anywhere, if someone shows up.

Sources

GMA News Online
A CNN hero started with a pushcart full of hopes (2009)

The Philippine Star
Pinoy named CNN ‘Hero of the Year’ (2009)

The Philippine Star
15 minutes with a hero: Efren Peñaflorida (2009)

GMA News Online
Efren Peñaflorida Jr: quality education one pushcart at a time (2012)

Fact-check note: The four sources agree on the main story and differ on some details. Wikipedia was also read and agrees on the 1997 start, the 9,000 nominees, the 28 heroes and the 22 November 2009 award. Childhood: Wikipedia and GMA say he grew up in a slum near a dump in Cavite City and was bullied; GMA says he was occasionally bullied and beaten by street toughs and that children as young as nine were in violent fights; GMA quotes him on his parents' jobs (a driver and a laundrywoman) while Wikipedia says his father drove a tricycle and his mother was a housewife, so the story does not describe his parents. Which group paid for which school years differs between sources (World Vision and Club 8586 are both named), so the story says only that scholarships and Club 8586 helped him. Founding: GMA (2009 and 2012), Wikipedia and The Philippine Star give 1997, when he was 16; GMA says he formed the group with two peers, named in 2012 as Jefferson Bernal and Reezel Alconcel Fajardo (spelled Rezcel in 2009); the story says "two friends". The pushcart: GMA says the platform grew from plastic bags to pedicabs to the kariton, with a mini-library, blackboards and folding tables and chairs; Wikipedia and The Philippine Star give cemeteries and dumps, and Wikipedia says classes were held on Saturdays. The 15-minute classes, bread first and then books, the parents who preferred their children to beg and the reading class for parents are from The Philippine Star (29 November 2009); "trash collectors" (basureros) is from GMA (2009) and The Philippine Star (23 November 2009). The CNN figures (9,000 nominees from over 100 countries, 28 heroes, top ten on 1 October, 2.75 million online votes in seven weeks, $100,000 prize plus $25,000 for the top ten, award on 22 November 2009) are from The Philippine Star (23 November 2009), with the nominees and heroes also in GMA and Wikipedia. Scale differs by date and measure: in November 2009 The Philippine Star reported more than 10,000 volunteers helping about 1,500 children, while its 29 November piece reported more than a hundred peers and about 300 children in four areas, and GMA (2012) reported about 800 children served with 85 to 90 percent going back to school; the story uses only the 2012 GMA figures and attributes them to the group. His job in 2009 is given as a public school teacher in Cavite (GMA, The Philippine Star) and as a high school teacher in Imus (The Philippine Star, 29 November 2009); the story says "a young teacher in Cavite". The quote, the "paying forward" remark, his education degree and his words about the vote are from GMA (2009). Another report puts the group's founding in 2007; the story follows the sources above. I could not open CNN's own pages (one

returned 404) or the Inquirer (403). What the group has done since 2012 was not checked, so the story stops there. The pin shows Cavite City. Lines marked "Our take" are interpretation. Everything else comes from the sources above.