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MANILA, Philippines -- Saying he owes a debt of gratitude to a Filipino he met 43 years ago, Katsutoshi Shimizu wants to pay back to the Filipino people in a big way.

The 73-year-old Japanese is shouldering the construction of up to 30 schoolhouses in remote villages in the Philippines, with the help of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP).

"I want to pay back to Filipinos because I came from a very, very poor family in Japan," Shimizu said in an interview at his office in Manila recently. "My life changed since I met a Filipino friend. Filipino friend he help and support me."

Shimizu is reluctant to go into details, refusing to reveal the name of his friend or the circumstances in which they met. Still, the impact of the friendship on his life is apparent.

"I met Filipino friend 1968 so I really can't forget Filipinos," he said in halting English.

Not long after their first meeting, Shimizu set up the Shimizu & Co., Ltd. (Japan). The company sells used ships and ship parts.

By 2010, he had sold 1,000 ships in the Philippines.

Shimizu is based in Japan, but has visited the Philippines more than 500 times since 1969 that he considers the country his second home.

His eldest son is also married to a Filipina.

His business boomed, and Shimizu believes it is time to share his fortune with Filipinos.

He established the RK Shimizu (Nagasaki) Foundation, Inc. as a vehicle for his philanthropy.

Believing that "education is the only key to a country's success," Shimizu focused on building schools.

Recently, a turnover ceremony was held for a six-classroom schoolhouse for the Venancio Trinidad Memorial Elementary School in Talisay, Batangas, which the Shimizu foundation built in partnership with the AFP and the Department of Education (DepEd).

The Japanese provided the funds while Army engineers from the 51st Engineer Brigade and troops from the Southern Luzon Command (Solcom) took charge of the construction.

Present at the turnover were Japanese Ambassador Toshinao Urabe, a representative of Nagasaki Prefecture Governor Nakamura Houdou, Shimizu's family, Education Secretary Armin Luistro, and AFP-National Development Support Command (Nadescom) commander Maj. Gen. Carlos Holganza.

Aside from having new classrooms, more than 500 school children from the Venancio Trinidad Memorial Elementary School were also given new sets of uniforms, shoes, bags and other school supplies donated by the people of Nagasaki Prefecture in Japan.

The school also received a 32-inch LCD television set, tables, chairs, cabinets and books from the prefecture.

Shimizu said it was the third school built by his foundation this year, and the first constructed in partnership with the AFP.

"I started my business since 42 years ago, I started selling second hand ships from Japan to Philippines then I made more than 1,000 ships to the Philippines. So now, I'm 73, and I want to pay back to Filipinos before I retire," Shimizu told the Bulletin.

Shimizu is also credited for installing an Environmental Recycling System (ERS) machine that converts solid waste to fertilizer in Baguio City.

The Japanese said for the past 10 years, he has been giving scholarships to members of his Filipino staff and some none-government organizations (NGOs). Now he's thinking about expanding his scholarship nationwide.

In December last year, a friend introduced him to Luistro, who told him about the shortage of about 150,000 classrooms in the country. "So I decided better give classrooms rather than scholarship," said Shimizu.

During one of his visits to Luistro, Shimizu recalled that an AFP official went inside Luistro's office before him. When he finally went inside the secretary's office, the DepEd head told him that he had just talked to the military officer, and then gave him a quotation which he was asked to study.

Not long after, he was introduced to Holganza, who invited him to the AFP headquarters where he was briefed on the activities of Nadescom.

"I was so surprised..he (Holganza) said enemy of military is killing them..but nowadays it's different because he said 'we don't create enemy first, friends first.' Military is for the people, communities, remote areas, and part of that is buildings schools..really, I was surprised," said Shimizu.

When they finally agreed to construct the schoolbuilding in Talisay, Shimizu said he was even more surprised because the military refused to take money from him.

"They don't ask us any single centavo, no money. They just asked for the materials they need, we supply the materials, I don't give any single centavo. No money that's why they have no chance to cheat us or to do something bad," he said.

“So really I feel good. Of course even Sunday the general (Holganza) told me about some negative news about military. But for me, when I met General Holganza, really it changed my image about the military,” Shimizu said.

“I believe building schools is an effective way of fostering friendship since many Filipinos will benefit from this. That way, I promote closer friendship between our two countries,” he said.

His foundation will continue even after he retires as its chairman, since his son will succeed him.

Shimizu said he wants the schoolchildren to learn the most beautiful word in their language, “arigato” or “salamat po” in Tagalog and “thank you” in English.

“I understand that by saying these words, a respect is being conveyed from each other. So my wish is for both of us to continue saying arigato and salamat po, said Shimizu. (Elena L. Aben)

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