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## Merryland Campsite: Redefining Nature at its Best<sup>1</sup>

The Batangas City, Philippines-based campsite looked the same as it did a few years ago. Its green grass, sturdy trees, chirping birds, fresh air, and quiet surroundings created an ambiance that Evelyn, the camp owner, thought reflected the gentleness of God. She stood on the Merryland Campsite grounds, reminiscing over the joys and fun-filled activities campers had experienced at Merryland like teambuilding, recreational activities, quiet moments, and reflection. Evelyn also thought about Merryland's camp tours, which promoted her values of love, care, and protection for God's magnificent creation. It seemed like just yesterday she opened the campsite, but as the years passed by, Merryland required more and more maintenance, and Evelyn and her husband found it difficult to cover the costs.

Due to the seasonal nature of campers' visits, the campsite's finances were tight. Evelyn longed to rehabilitate and redevelop the campsite, but she did not know where to begin. Merryland's facilities were made mostly from indigenous materials, but over the years, they deteriorated and lost their value. Damage caused by typhoons, the most recent of which was Typhoon Glenda, made the situation even more pressing. With these considerations in mind, Evelyn would have to make decisions this year that would allow her campsite to survive and thrive.

She had mixed ideas. Would she replace the campsite's facilities with new designs that used reinforced concrete and other durable construction materials, or would she add more amenities? What would be her source of funding? She couldn't cover the costs. If she took out loans, what kind of interest rate would she have to pay? Would she be able to make her monthly payments? Was there another way to

go? What about getting other stakeholders involved? What about a partnership? Whichever direction she chose, she would still worry about the future. What if she invested in the improvements and revenues did not increase to cover the costs?

## **Merryland Campsite**

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Evelyn and her family founded the Merryland Campsite in 2005. Their main aim for the campsite was to create fun for campers through learning, bonding, and teambuilding activities, among other experiences. Their vision for the campsite was a safe haven, where campers would be inspired by the Creator and His creations. Their mission was to create a place where campers could have a close encounter with God and nurture love for others through meaningful retreats, camping activities, and quiet moments of prayer and meditation.

The family was proud of the activities they established at the campsite, including educational sessions, outdoor games, campfires, nature hikes, swimming, and quiet time. The campsite also served as a venue for celebrations like garden weddings and receptions, birthdays, and anniversaries. It was ideal for retreats and other religious activities as well as family gatherings. Moreover, the campsite proved to be a good place for school and office activities such as camps, seminars, and workshops.

Despite all the campsite offered, Evelyn and her family were taking stock of the financial and manpower constraints they faced. They could expand the campsite's service offerings, but the cost of rehabilitation and redevelopment was too high and a return on investment was not guaranteed. And loans could become a burden over the long term. Still, Evelyn was undeterred by these concerns; she felt it was best to keep the campsite alive and functioning.

## **Evelyn's Concerns**

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### **Maintenance**

Maintenance of the campsite was limited to cleaning the swimming pool, multipurpose garden hall, and dormitory for transients as well as grounds maintenance, such as grass cutting and weed removal. To a certain extent, worn-out bulbs and faucets were also being replaced. One support staffer and one house helper provided the necessary manpower. Still, Evelyn was not making the more capital-intensive repairs.

### **Soil Erosion**

Rains consistently wore away at the natural land contour of the campsite; the soil erosion had to be addressed to maintain what remained. Evelyn was considering preventive measures like the installation of concrete curbs arranged in layers that could double as benches for spectators in the proposed amphitheater site.

### **Termites**

Although the campsite location was accessible and strategic, the setting was rural with century-old trees as well as a variety of plants and greeneries that were affected by termites. The facilities were made up of a mix of materials that were also prone to attack by termites like bamboo and wood. Evelyn was increasingly finding termite control and prevention to be tedious and costly tasks.

## Vulnerability to Climatological Conditions

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Since the main attractions of the campsite were its natural endowments, Evelyn and her family retained Merryland's older trees and fruit bearing plants. They also placed flowering trees and other plants around the campsite. They introduced facilities that were compatible or blended with these types of surroundings. While these facilities and surroundings were attractive during the summer, they were not appropriate for the rainy season.

Batangas City was hit by Glenda, a Signal No. 3<sup>i</sup> Typhoon July 16, 2014. At that storm level, the physical toll to the campsite and its surroundings was enormous. The damage included fallen plants, broken branches, flattened fences, damaged electrical installations, and destroyed roofing over the campers' cooking area. Evelyn had to contend with the burden of the clean-up operation and repairs not just from this typhoon, but those that occurred season after season and year after year. The costs far exceeded the earnings of the campsite.

## Operations

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Merryland was a sole proprietorship with camping and catering as its business activities. A micro-business under Republic Act 9178, Merryland qualified for a tax exemption at the national level. Nevertheless, due to the seasonal nature of the business, the campsite was operating at a net loss, leading Evelyn to seek outside sources of funding. To that end, she pursued a college teaching job, consultancy, and research work to augment Merryland's income.

Evelyn found that after Merryland started, similar businesses began to sprout up in the area. Whereas in 2005, it was the only place where swimmers could go in the locality, four resorts had entered the same community. These competitors, however, mainly focused on resort amenities, allowing Merryland to remain competitive for overnight and transient accommodation, youth education, and religious services and gatherings.

## The Financials

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Evelyn did not allot special funding for the rehabilitation and redevelopment of the campsite. The campsite only saw solid earnings during the summer, Christmas vacation, and other student breaks. The high maintenance costs during the summer practically eroded any savings for the lean months.

Clearly, funding for the rehabilitation and redevelopment of the campsite would have to be sourced elsewhere. To that end, Evelyn was considering a partnership with other stakeholders. A private partnership would bring in the necessary funds and seemed more viable than paying interest on a loan.

## Plan Preparation

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Evelyn thought that a well-defined architectural character suited to the campsite and its ambiance would attract local and foreign clients. Planning considerations for the site included proper placement of

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<sup>i</sup> A public storm warning Signal 3 indicates that tropical cyclone winds of 100 kph (62 mph) to 185 kph (115 mph) are expected in the next 18 hours.

buildings, amenities, landscaping, and parking areas (see **Appendix A**). The master plan would also take into consideration century-old trees, different kinds of fruit-bearing trees, flowering trees, and varieties of plants already in place at the campsite.

A working budget for the next two to three years would have to be completed as part of the business plan. If a phased implementation was to be considered, Evelyn would have to identify the number and type of personnel required, as well as the correct funding amount needed to support the facilities, operations, and maintenance costs.

## Next Steps for Merryland

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Evelyn felt that with God on her side, nothing would be impossible. She thought that her strong determination to serve her campers — most of them youth — was a result of her great faith in God. For her, the campsite was God's great provision and she wanted to thank God through this ministry. Her passion to serve youths and other clients through values formation activities, which she believed would lead them to live a life pleasing to God, was in line with the campsite vision and mission.

As all of these thoughts swirled through her mind, Evelyn decided to make a list of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats facing Merryland. She thought the list would help her to face the challenges at hand. What should she tackle first? How could she make the campsite self-sustainable? Would she seek loan financing or look to a partnership? Were there other alternatives? She looked around at the campsite's beauty and felt determined to find a way to share it with campers. Would she find a way to reach her aspirations? Would her dreams become reality? (See **Appendix B** for photos of the campsite).

## Appendix A

### Facilities and Amenities Proposed

#### Facilities/Activities

- Row houses or a condo hotel as the need arises.
- Office, business center, patio, food court, kitchen convenience store, and waste management/material recovery facility for recyclable waste.
- Multipurpose hall with 500-person capacity.
- Additional outdoor areas for other facilities and activities, such as an amphitheater, beach volleyball space, and bonfire area.
- Shower and cooking areas as well as comfort rooms.
- Covered walkways.
- Open walkways and jogging lanes.
- Welcome arch leading to the campsite.
- Drainage.

#### Considerations

- Proper location of facilities so as not to block natural views.
- Provision of service areas for laundry and drying facilities.
- Should be positioned to maximize exposure to clients, preferably by the roadside. New canteen facilities are needed along with a minimart/convenience store for shopping convenience.
- Administration office at the front of the property. Aside from managing the campsite, Evelyn could offer consultancy services as an environmental planner. She considered adding a cooperative store to showcase Batangas goods and delicacies, providing income to nearby communities and acting as a source of income generation for the campsite.
- Facility for weddings, large-scale camps, and other big events. The facility could be partitioned into smaller rooms with dividers that would be folded when a larger space is required.
- The downward slope can be reinforced/strengthened to arrest further erosion.
- Connectivity from parking areas to condo hotels, row houses, multipurpose hall, and other building facilities.
- Appropriate landscaping.
- Must be attractive to catch the attention of passers-by.
- Provide sufficient drainage. Ground improvements should address diversion of runoff toward the creek.

*Source: Merryland Campsite.*

Appendix B

Photos of the Merryland Campsite



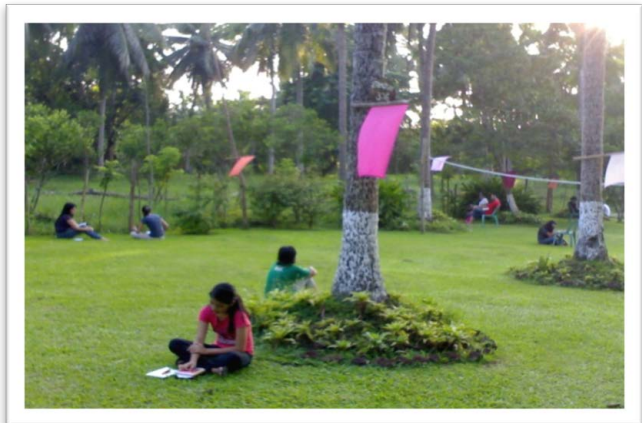
A view of the campsite from west to east, revealing a garden.



Campers playing volleyball in an open space of the campsite.



The entrance of the campsite features these 100-year-old mango trees.



Campers meditating on Bible passages in the morning hours at the campsite.





A wedding reception arrangement in one of the campsite's open spaces.



Children on the west side of the campsite.



A swimming pool attracted campers to Merryland, especially during the summer months of April and May.



A view of the grounds near the swimming pool.



The campsite's garden multipurpose hall, made from indigenous materials like bamboo and coconut lumber.



Two of Merryland's Nipa hut cottages before Typhoon Glenda.



The campsite's sloping terrain.



Termites attacked trees in the wooded lands surrounding the campsite.



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Huts and their surroundings at Merryland after Typhoon Glenda.



A tree house and the broken branch of a mango tree after Typhoon Glenda.



The mini-canteen and serving area after Typhoon Glenda.



The shaded grounds of the campsite after Typhoon Glenda.

Source: Photos courtesy of Merryland Campsite.

## Endnotes

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1 The author gathered the information in this case from interviews conducted with Merryland Campsite owner Evelyn Estigoy from July 2014 to November 2014.