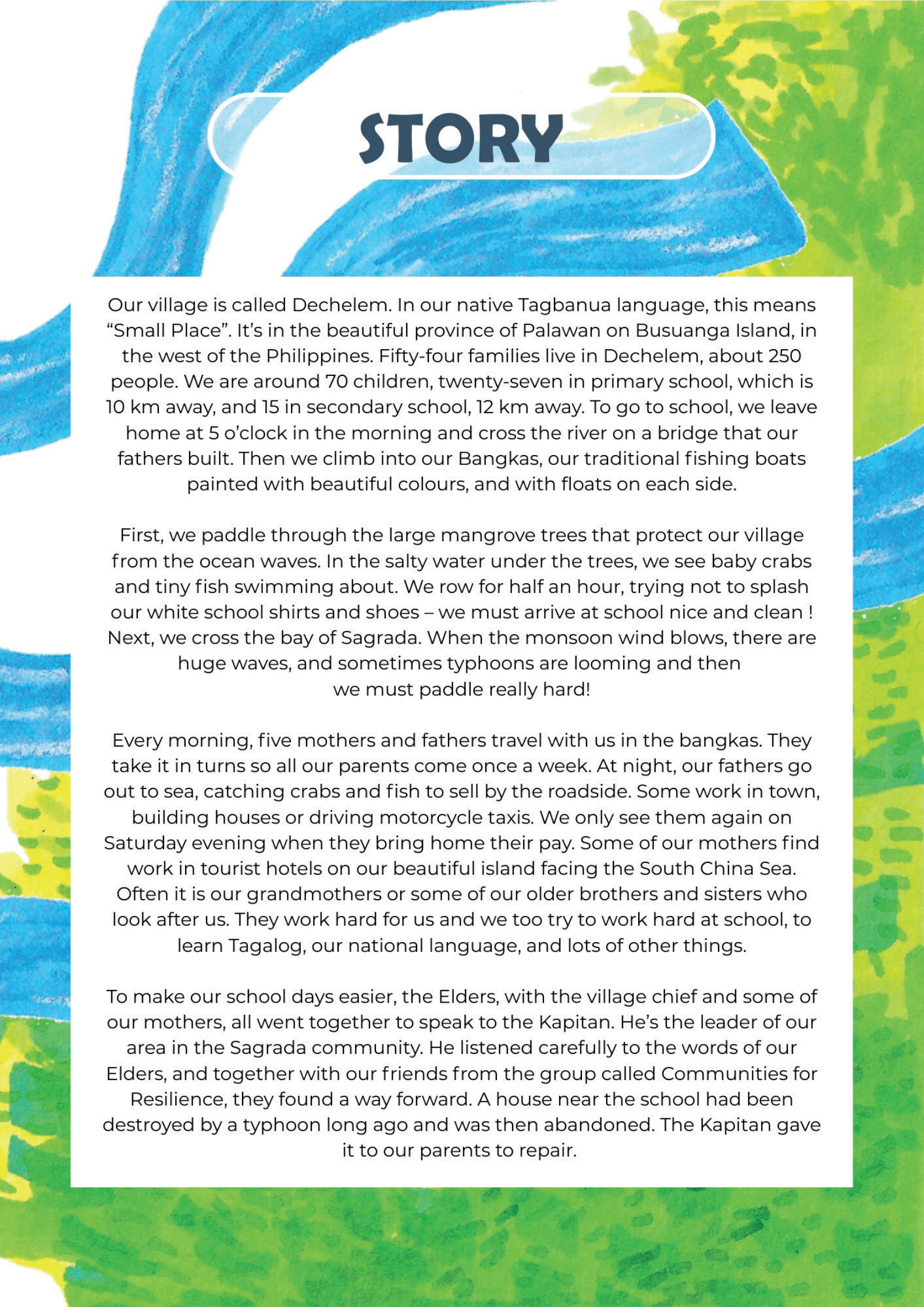




STORY

Our village is called Dechelem. In our native Tagbanua language, this means “Small Place”. It’s in the beautiful province of Palawan on Busuanga Island, in the west of the Philippines. Fifty-four families live in Dechelem, about 250 people. We are around 70 children, twenty-seven in primary school, which is 10 km away, and 15 in secondary school, 12 km away. To go to school, we leave home at 5 o’clock in the morning and cross the river on a bridge that our fathers built. Then we climb into our Bangkas, our traditional fishing boats painted with beautiful colours, and with floats on each side.

First, we paddle through the large mangrove trees that protect our village from the ocean waves. In the salty water under the trees, we see baby crabs and tiny fish swimming about. We row for half an hour, trying not to splash our white school shirts and shoes – we must arrive at school nice and clean ! Next, we cross the bay of Sagrada. When the monsoon wind blows, there are huge waves, and sometimes typhoons are looming and then we must paddle really hard!

Every morning, five mothers and fathers travel with us in the bangkas. They take it in turns so all our parents come once a week. At night, our fathers go out to sea, catching crabs and fish to sell by the roadside. Some work in town, building houses or driving motorcycle taxis. We only see them again on Saturday evening when they bring home their pay. Some of our mothers find work in tourist hotels on our beautiful island facing the South China Sea. Often it is our grandmothers or some of our older brothers and sisters who look after us. They work hard for us and we too try to work hard at school, to learn Tagalog, our national language, and lots of other things.

To make our school days easier, the Elders, with the village chief and some of our mothers, all went together to speak to the Kapitan. He’s the leader of our area in the Sagrada community. He listened carefully to the words of our Elders, and together with our friends from the group called Communities for Resilience, they found a way forward. A house near the school had been destroyed by a typhoon long ago and was then abandoned. The Kapitan gave it to our parents to repair.

With some help to buy corrugated iron sheets for the roof and some cement, our parents worked every Saturday and Sunday all last year. Now we have a safe, dry “halfway house” with a fireplace and cooking pots so we can cook some rice and fish sauce! At our lunch break, we no longer have to wait on the roadside with empty stomachs while the local children go home to eat.

Now we have our own “home place”! We can even wash our white school shirts there and arrive clean at the school gate.

For a few years now, thanks to our friends from ‘Communities for Resilience’ and our ATD Fourth World friend, Mr Eric Lopez, every Saturday we have the Community Library in our village.

With the help of our big brothers (we call them ‘Kuya’) and big sisters (‘Ate’), we schoolchildren all meet in the ‘Balay Tarahomonan’, our Community Learning Centre. The little ones who are too young to go to school also come to sing and play with us. The facilitators read us stories, and get us to learn letters, numbers, and colours, and they listen to us when we tell them what is happening in our lives. It is really thanks to the facilitators that our Elders realised our long journey to school was just too difficult. They went to see the Kapitan again, and also talked with the Mayor of Busuanga when she visited us in Dechelem. She helped our village set up a Day-Care Centre, a nursery-school run by one of the village mothers, Mrs Reyna.

For a year now, 19 children from 3 to 5 have been learning how to act in class, talk in front of others, and sing together, and even dance our traditional Tablay.

We are happy to have parents, facilitators, friends, and Elders who give us their support. One day, we will become Elders too, and we will stand up for the rights of all the children in our villages, and around the world.

Bangkas, our traditional boats

