

# The Heart at Play Foundation

## Interview and Podcast

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I was very privileged to talk to Patty Rivera, the director of the Heart at Play Foundation, a non-profit organisation catering to persons with developmental disabilities from underprivileged communities based in Manila, the Philippines. The Heart at Play Foundation was founded by Patty's mother in the early 2010s, working to empower the special needs community in Manila by providing free dance movement therapy classes to children with autism and other developmental disabilities.



**Can you tell me a bit more about yourself?**



I'm Patty, or Teacher Patty, or Coach Patty to my students, and I'm currently the co-founder and executive director of the Heart at Play Foundation (THP). I manage The Heart at Play, alongside my older sister Therese Rivera.

I am a student of Master's in special education from the University of Philippines, Diliman Campus, and I'm also trained in

Applied Behavioural Analysis. I got my certification as a registered behavioural technician two years ago.

So I've been dancing for 24 years and started competitive dancing when I was 15 years old, representing the Philippines in international competitions. And I have been teaching dance professionally for 11 years now, about the same time that I've been a disability advocate through our work in the Heart at Play Foundation. So, by trade, I am a professional choreographer and a competitive dancer, but I have since expanded my expertise to inform the work we do in the Heart at Play Foundation.

**Can you please tell me briefly a bit about what the Heart at Play Foundation does, along with its ethos and mission?**



The work we do in the Heart at Play is catering to persons with developmental disabilities, including, but not limited to, autism spectrum disorder, Down's syndrome, cerebral palsy, Möbius syndrome and other forms of developmental disabilities. We cater to economically underprivileged or indigent families here in our capital, Metro Manila. We provide them with alternative therapies, so primarily dance or movement therapy, as well as monetary support if the need arises. We've recently also

acknowledged the necessity of providing support to the people who take care of these developmentally challenged learners too, so we occasionally have support group meetings with the moms and guardians to check in with their mental health and disposition.

## Can you tell me how the idea of the Heart at Play Foundation originated and how you got around to making this inspiration a reality?

Coming from a family of dancers, The Heart at Play Foundation started as a family initiative inspired by teacher Anna Rivera, who pursued a Master's in Special Education and discovered the potential of using dance therapy as a therapeutic tool for individuals with special needs during her immersion in the US.



### She identified two gaps in the existing methods:

1. Limited accessibility for those with severe disabilities: most dance movement therapies catered only to individuals with mild to moderate conditions.
2. Lack of focus on memorisation and structured sequences, which are essential for working and long-term memory development. Upon returning to the Philippines in 2012, she sought to make dance accessible for individuals with profound disabilities, leading to the development of a pioneering methodology. I became involved at 14 by initially tagging along, and 12 years later, the initiative has grown into a registered NGO with aspirations to formalise and expand its therapeutic approach. Now, the foundation is on the verge of a major milestone: establishing the first performing arts and therapy centre for individuals with special needs in the Philippines, marking a legacy of passion transformed into meaningful impact.

### Patty's top tips on setting up an NGO\*: <10 steps for the beginner

1. Distinguish between advocacy and foundation
  - An advocacy is an informal movement.
  - A foundation requires formal registration and government compliance.
2. Secure initial capitalisation
  - A foundation is still considered an incorporation, therefore you are required to provide documentation on your initial capitalisation (at the time of THP's registration, the minimum amount required was 1,000,000 Philippine pesos, approx, US\$20,000).
3. Register with the government – the Bureau of Internal Revenue (BIR) and Securities Exchange Commission.
  - As a legal entity (Inc.), the foundation must be registered for tax purposes.
4. Draft Articles of Incorporation
  - A formal document outlining the mission, structure and governance of the NGO.

5. Appoint a Board of Trustees
  - Identify board members and key staff responsible for decision-making and operations.
6. Comply with tax requirements
  - NGOs must pay taxes and file reports with the BIR and other relevant agencies.
7. Quarterly compliance and reporting
  - Regular financial and operational reporting to maintain legal status.
8. Ensure proper governance and accountability
  - Maintain transparent financial records, ethical practices and operational efficiency.
9. Plan for long-term sustainability
  - Beyond paperwork, an NGO needs funding strategies, donor relations and community engagement for long-term success.

\*Requirements might vary from country to country

## Can you briefly tell us about the use of dance therapy as a form of alternative therapy for children with developmental disabilities?

Alternative therapies like music therapy, hydrotherapy and dance movement therapy (DMT) are gaining recognition alongside conventional treatments such as occupational therapy and speech and language therapy.

The Heart at Play Foundation has developed its own Dance BEST© (Behaviour, Emotional, Executive Skills, and Sensory Targeted Movement Therapy) methodology, which addresses five key domains:

1. Physical domain:
  - Improves gross, fine and oral motor skills, balance, agility, strength, and body awareness.
  - Enhances daily self-help skills like dressing, grooming and self-protection.
2. Psychosocial domain:
  - Builds social skills for individuals with autism, helping them engage in socially acceptable behaviours.
  - Enhances self-esteem and confidence through dance mastery and public performances.
  - Provides emotional catharsis for non-verbal individuals, offering a healthy outlet for expression.
3. Cognitive domain:
  - Engages left and right brain functions to enhance sequencing, working memory and long-term memory.
  - Improves attention, focus, impulse control and executive functioning.
4. Sensory domain:
  - Helps manage sensory processing dysfunction, a common issue in children with developmental disabilities.
  - Provides exposure to auditory, visual, tactile and proprioceptive stimuli, improving sensory regulation.
  - Encourages multitasking and neural pathway development.
5. Behavioural domain:
  - Reduces self-injurious behaviours by redirecting impulses into dance movements.
  - Helps students self-regulate, improving behaviour in everyday settings (e.g. meals, public outings).



- Promotes functional communication, allowing students to express their needs without the use of disruptive behaviour.



The Dance BEST© program has led to measurable improvements, such as reducing self-injurious incidents like hitting and scratching, and enables children to participate in family meals, public outings and other social activities without displaying disruptive behaviour that was previously present.

The program supports lifelong intervention by helping individuals with developmental disabilities a) regulate sensory overload, b) build a stronger mind-body connection, c) learn daily living skills and ultimately d) integrate with the broader society whilst pursuing a self-actualised life.

## What are the current limitations towards children with disabilities in Filipino society?

1. Lack of accurate data and research
  - No up-to-date, specific statistics on developmental disabilities.
  - Disability data lumps physical and developmental disabilities together, making it difficult to assess needs.
  - Without proper data, budgeting and service deployment remain inadequate.
2. Stigma and lack of awareness
  - Parents often hesitate to disclose their child's disability due to social stigma, misinformation and cultural beliefs.
  - This lack of transparency hinders policy making and prevents early interventions.
  - Standardised awareness campaigns are needed to combat disability stigma and to promote inclusion.
3. Gaps in services across the lifespan
  - Early intervention services exist, but support dwindles as individuals reach adulthood.
  - Few employment training centres for persons with special needs.
  - Lack of specialists to provide lifelong support from childhood to adulthood.
4. Limited opportunities for severe disabilities
  - Job opportunities are often limited to verbal individuals or those with mild to moderate disabilities.
  - Those with severe cerebral palsy or self-injurious behaviour are left with no employment prospects.
  - More businesses need to adopt inclusive employment strategies.
5. Government involvement and economic support
  - Healthcare subsidies for developmental disabilities are insufficient.
  - The cost of autism care for Filipino families can be up to 20% of their income, while average family income is less than \$500 USD.
  - Need for government-backed incentives for businesses to hire people with disabilities.
  - Stronger legislation is needed to promote accessibility, inclusivity and employment incentives for people with special needs.

## What are some event highlights over the years for the Heart at Play?

In 2019, our foundation represented the Philippines' disability community in Singapore's largest inclusive concert held at the National University of Singapore. We flew out a 54-man delegation, where they performed a culturally inspired routine in front of the government ministers, including then Singapore president Halimah Yacob. If that meant they would need a shadow to assist them, that was okay with us – so it was a combination of dances performed independently and with parents and guardians. Almost everybody on our flight had never been out of the country before. So this experience was quite literally the trip of a lifetime for them, and we're so grateful they got to have that right before the pandemic, it was just life-changing being a part of that scene!

## What are your thoughts on the future for the Heart at Play Foundation?

So two key goals for us:

1) Program development. We have to continue developing our modality, and we are now focusing on behavioural interventions. So all of our programs are now geared towards catering to the behaviour because we believe it's the precursor to learning – to learn skills in order to flourish in life.

2) We hope to build our very own centre by 2026; the centre is not just for performing arts, nor is it just for therapy. It's going to be a one-stop shop that caters to both – so we'll provide a holistic curriculum for persons of all developmental disabilities across the ages.



I would like to thank Patty for her time and for giving us her insightful thoughts and sharing of her experiences. I wish THP all the best in future endeavours!

For more information about the Heart at Play Foundation, please visit their website at [www.theheartatplayfoundation.org](http://www.theheartatplayfoundation.org), and tune in to the INSPIRE podcast to hear the full interview and for poignant stories that would melt your heart!

Photos provided by The Heart at Play Foundation.