

Rooted to a Cause

Share in the journey of a dedicated individual's
mission to empower women

Words **Michelle Angela Carag** | Photography **Rollie Valenauela**

Community photos courtesy of **Ami Swanepoel**

Makeup **Lyn V. Credo** of Creations by Lourd Ramos Salon



ONE LOOK AT AMINA “AMI” EVANGELISTA SWANEPOEL’S CREDENTIALS AND YOU MIGHT PICTURE A WOMAN WITH A HIGH-POWERED JOB, LIVING GRAND IN THE METROPOLIS AND JET-SETTING AROUND THE GLOBE. For one, she attained her tertiary education from the esteemed Wellesley College in Boston, Massachusetts. Then she went on to pursue her graduate studies in Columbia University, an Ivy League institution. Armed with rich education, she could have had any high paying corporate job that she wanted. Instead, she chose to retreat to Palawan and take on a nobler mission: conquering maternal mortality and other reproductive health issues that plagued the region.

“Initially, I was studying sexual health because I was interested in issues about HIV,” Ami shares with *Celebrity Living*. “But later on *mas naging interesado ako sa* family and maternal health. After graduate school, I worked for a year in New York as an associate program manager at Anthony Knerr & Associates. It’s a boutique consulting firm specialized in strategic planning for non-profit organizations.”

But Ami’s heart still lies in family health. So when her mother, Susan Evangelista, asked her if she was willing to come back to the Philippines to start a non-profit organization in Palawan that focused on empowering women and upholding maternal health, she did not hesitate to pack her bags and go home.

PLANTING THE ROOTS

The mother and daughter team started Roots of Health in 2008 while Ami was still in New York. Lynlyn Paliza, the very first staff member who is now the organization’s associate program manager, assisted Susan in completing the requirements needed to

start Roots of Health. Two months after the organization officially began rendering its services in June 2009, Ami and her husband Marcus Swanepoel moved to Palawan.

For Ami, it is perfect to have the organization operating in Palawan due to its high maternal mortality rate. She shares, “We did a study and found out that the region ranks second in the Philippines after the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) in terms of maternal mortality rate. Also, my mother used to teach in Palawan State University and she would always have her heart broken every time her students would drop out because of unplanned pregnancy. The parents of these kids worked really hard to send them to college so it was really sad. We really just had to do something about it.”

THE ADVOCACY

Roots of Health uses two approaches in promoting its cause. The first is doing community work, in which the staff builds a partnership with the local city health office and barangay officials to identify which communities are the most underserved.

“Either the communities are too far from the health center or the health center itself does not have a steady supply of medicine,” Ami says. “Some do not also offer prenatal checkups. What we would do is provide free clinical services, aside from giving free contraceptives. *Alagang-alaga talaga namin ang mga buntis* from the very beginning. And if they can’t afford to give birth in the hospital, they can call our nurses who will stay with them until they deliver at home.”

While they focus mainly on reproductive health, they adopt a holistic approach to help women and children maintain a happy and healthy lifestyle. They provide lectures



Leftmost: Despite Ami's privileged upbringing, her compassion makes her fitting for her role in Roots of Health. She says, "The work became much more meaningful after I had my baby. The things that I want for my baby are the same things that our clients want for their children. All of us are trying to have healthier families. It's really universal!"

Left, top to bottom: Ami received an award from Probe Foundation and UN Millennium Foundation on September 2010 for her hardwork in helping attain the fifth goal in the Millennium Development Goals, which is to reduce maternal mortality • "Lynlyn and I used to prepare a huge *kaldero* full of *chamorado* in the first couple of months that we were doing our community outreach work," Ami says. "We still do provide snacks for our participants but we don't make *chamorado* anymore. Instead our snacks always include some meat and lots of veggies. Other times it's either pasta or rice, which is so much healthier!"

on family, relationships, financial management and human rights. On top of that, they also help provide education for the children from ages four to twelve who are out of school. "We do basic literacy and math, and also nutritional support," Ami stresses. "We monitor the children's nutrition by weighing them every week. Any child who is underweight or malnourished is given special vitamins and food supplements three times a week to help them meet their nutritional needs."

Meanwhile, the second approach focuses on providing reproductive health education in schools. "What we teach is age-appropriate!" Ami exclaims with a laugh. "We teach college students about contraceptives, sexually transmitted diseases and HIV. But in elementary and high school, we teach about the science behind contraception. *Sakop na rin niyan ang puberty and also how pregnancy happens.*"

For everything that they have been doing for the past three years, Ami feels lucky because they

have never experienced any financial hurdles. She reveals that while she spends a lot of her time doing fund-raising activities, Roots of Health has a steady stream of supporters ranging from individual donors to major foundations such as Barclays Capital, an investment bank, and the Global Funds for Women.

"Since we are also incorporated in the United States, a lot of donations also come from there," Ami says. "Also, one of our advisory board members is Carlos Celdran, a noted cultural activist. He's been very, very generous with his time and donations to raise awareness about our work."

Giving up the American pasture in exchange for the Palawan soil does not give Ami feelings of regret. In fact, she is more than happy to be back in the Philippines where she can do a lot more for her fellowmen.

"I have done some brief stints working in other countries but it's much more meaningful to be working in the country that I was born in," Ami concludes with affection. "It really means a

ROOTING FOR THE RH BILL

In line with Roots of Health, Ami goes out of her way to promote the Reproductive Health Bill. She gives some key points on how the bill can be beneficial to everyone, especially for people living in depressed areas:

- **Funding for health centers.** "Health centers have no funds to help women *kaya mataas ang rate ng maternal death sa Pilipinas*. If there is an RH Bill, maternal mortality will go down because there will be more lying in clinics and mothers, even if they're poor, can give birth to a midwife or a nurse."
- **Access to contraceptives.** "Every time I ask pregnant women—those who aren't financially capable to have children—why they didn't use contraceptives, they always say they couldn't afford it. Note that one pack of pills costs at least P30. When someone tells you *na hindi nila kaya ang P30*, that just shows you how poor these families are. So they really need government-mandated free supplies of contraceptives."
- **Proper reproductive health education.** "The RH Bill can educate married couples on how to plan pregnancies and how to achieve a healthy reproductive life. If the people are equipped with proper reproductive health education, the need for abortion lessens because the rate of unplanned pregnancies goes down."

lot to be able to take what I learned from other countries and use those skills to help the families here." 🏠

Roots of Health is located at 67 North Highway, San Jose Puerto Prinsesa, Palawan; visit <rootsofhealth.org>; like <facebook.com/rootsofhealth>; follow <twitter.com/ROHorg>; call (939)252 1745

IT'S TIME TO GIVE BACK!

Take part in fighting maternal mortality by supporting Roots of Health!

- **Be a volunteer.**
- **Be a financial supporter.** Roots of Health needs your support! Send cash or check donations via BPI account number 3481006057, under the account name Ungat ng Kalusugan, Inc.