

1. About Me and Jairo

Hello to everyone! My name is Mary Joy Tolentino, 23 years old from Bohol, Philippines, and I am a proud single mother to my wonderful three-year-old son, Jairo Aidel Timbal.

I became pregnant with Jairo in my second year of college, many thought my journey was over. People belittled my situation and urged me to stop, but they didn't realize that Jairo wasn't my "reason to quit", he was my reason to keep going. I never saw Jairo as a burden; instead, he became my greatest source of hope. Every time things got hard, I reminded myself that my son deserved a bright future, and I was the one who had to build it for him. Fortunately, with a mix of online and face-to-face classes, I was able to balance my studies and my responsibilities. To make ends meet, I turned to online selling and online promoting, using every spare moment to build a source of income that helped support our daily needs. I am also deeply grateful to my mother, whose help in caring for my baby during my face-to-face classes. My diploma isn't just my achievement—it's my first gift to my son.

"I ended up becoming a single mother because Jairo's father left us. When I was only five months pregnant, he had already found someone else. I tried my best to keep our family together, but things didn't go as I had hoped. I wanted so much to raise my child in a complete family because I know the pain of longing for a father's love" because my own father died when I was eighteen.

"Jairo uses the surname 'Timbal' because his paternal grandmother and I are on good terms. Since we have known each other for a long time, she insisted we use the father's last name so that we can seek financial support in the future if the father secures a good job. I decided to prioritize Jairo's future over my own ego. To this day, we have no communication with his father; we only stay in contact with his grandmother. Choosing his future over my pride is the greatest strength I can show as a mother, ensuring he has every advantage and the secure life he deserves.

Even though he left us, it didn't stop me from doing my best to raise my baby. Instead, it motivated me. It showed me that even without him, I am capable of raising our son on my own. My journey isn't defined by who left, but by the love and strength I choose to give my child every single day.

"In Jairo's case, things took a terrifying turn just two days after he was born. According to the doctor, Jairo became dehydrated because he wasn't getting enough milk from me. I never imagined something like that would happen; I truly thought everything was okay. I breastfed him, and he would sleep and burp right after feeding. At the time, bottle-feeding was strictly forbidden. I blamed myself for what happened because I had prepared everything before giving birth, I even had formula milk ready just in case. But I didn't give it to him. In my mind, I keep thinking that if only I had let him have that formula, none of this would have happened and everything would have been okay. If only I could turn back time, I would change it all."

"For a long time, I carried the weight of those 'if onlys.' I blamed myself for Jairo's days in the NICU, thinking that if I had only followed my instinct to use the formula I had prepared, he wouldn't have suffered. I felt like I had failed him before our journey had even truly begun.

At the hospital, the doctors prepared me for the worst. They warned me that because of the seizures, Jai might face brain damage or become a candidate for Cerebral Palsy. When we were finally discharged, I hoped for the best, and at first, everything seemed fine. However, by the time Jairo was five months old, I started noticing differences. I couldn't help but compare my baby to others when it comes to their milestones. Jairo wasn't making eye contact and still struggled to support his head. My gut told me something was wrong, so I took him for a check-up. The pediatrician referred us to a neurologist, where we received the news: Jai's head circumference wasn't growing as it should. It was then that he was officially diagnosed with microcephaly, Cerebral Palsy, vision impairment, seizure disorder, and global developmental delay.

2. Q&A

- What's been the most rewarding part of your journey as a mum so far?

"The most rewarding part of my journey has been the healing I've found in our small victories. For a long time, I carried the weight of 'if onlys' and blamed myself for Jairo's time in the NICU. But I've realized that my journey isn't defined by the past or by those who left us; it's defined by my own strength and Jairo's incredible resilience. Now, I find my greatest joy in witnessing the milestones that others might take for granted. In our world, a single smile or a small movement is a massive mountain climbed. Seeing Jairo defy the odds reminds me that progress isn't about speed it's about the heart we put into every single day.

- What kind of support has made the biggest difference for you?

As a single mother, emotional support and community visibility make a world of difference. While medical resources are vital for Jairo's needs, knowing that we aren't walking this path alone is what truly keeps my spirit high. At the start of my journey, many people belittled my situation and urged me to stop, but I have found hope in the unexpected kindness of others.

The most significant support has often come from the heart of the community. There were times when I didn't have enough money, and my neighbors stepped in to provide clothes for Jairo to wear. Even a stranger I barely knew at the hospital reached out to give him clothes and provide money to buy some of his other needs when we needed them most. These acts of grace provided a sense of security and reminded me that Jairo is loved by more than just me.

Combined with my own mother's help in caring for my baby during my classes, this "village" is what gave me the strength to keep going. Knowing there is a community that cares about Jairo's well-being reminds me that even though I am raising him on my own, I don't have to carry the weight of the world by myself.

Whenever we go out, they always embrace Jairo as a normal baby. They encourage their own children to accompany him and talk to him, even though Jairo can't talk, they still call his name and speak to him as if he's right there in the conversation. They don't let his silence create a barrier; instead, they fill that space with warmth and inclusion and Jairo loves it. I can see it clearly in his smile. These moments are more than just friendly gestures; they are powerful acts of inclusion. Watching him interact with other kids without judgment reaffirms that he belongs and is valued exactly as he is.

- Is there anything you wish more people understood about raising a child with cerebral palsy/microcephaly?

I wish more people were open-minded and realized that these special babies exist and deserve a place in this world. I want them to understand that while our journey involves many challenges and specialized care, Jairo is first and foremost a child who deserves joy, dignity, and inclusion. It's not just about a diagnosis; it's about the person. Raising a child with these conditions is a "marathon" pace, and sometimes the best thing someone can offer is simply a listening ear without judgment.

It is heartbreaking when people look at us and say, "Maybe you tried to abort your baby, that's why it ended like that." How could I ever hurt my own child? In reality, I feel so much pity for children who have been abandoned, how could I possibly hurt mine? Jairo was never a burden; he has always been my greatest source of hope. I wish people understood that our journey is defined by the love and strength I choose to give him every single day, not by the cruel assumptions of others.

•What is something Jairo has done recently to make you smile?

"Looking back at our journey from the time he was an infant to now, at three years old, I am amazed by how Jairo has developed. There was a time when he wouldn't respond or even smile when I called his name, but now he has become such a cheerful baby. My favorite part is that he now responds to me with a beautiful, lovely smile. When he hears me laugh, he laughs right along with me, it's a sound that makes all my problems fade away and motivates me to keep going.

What truly moves me is how he communicates. Even though he can't talk with words like us, he absolutely responds when I talk to him. He 'talks' back with his sweet coos and by kicking his legs with excitement. Therapy has also helped him a lot in this journey. We are seeing so much physical progress; his head balance is much better than before, and his joy is infectious. Even mealtime has improved; he used to struggle to chew, but now he manages a little bit more each day. He absolutely loves pork and chicken! Instead of crying, he smiles and finishes his food. I still use a blender to prepare his meals because, while he is starting to chew a little bit, he still can't quite swallow larger pieces of food. Even with that extra step in the kitchen, seeing him enjoy his favorites makes every bit of effort worth it.

Recently, I've been so proud to see him managing to move on his own. When I put him in a crawling position, he can now turn himself around. I can see the pure joy in his eyes when he realizes he managed to do it by himself. Seeing that light in his eyes and hearing those happy sounds during his exercises reminds me exactly why I do what I do.

What are your hopes and dreams for you and Jairo for the future?

My deepest dream is for Jairo to live a life filled with comfort and the best possible quality of life. Currently, my biggest prayer is for his vision. Because he faces vision impairment, I am determined to find a way to take him to a specialized eye doctor to see what can be done to help him. I want to do everything in my power to help Jairo see how beautiful this world truly is.

As for myself, my journey as an educator is a tribute to two of the most important people in my life. Beyond my dedication to Jairo, this path is a promise kept to my father. Before he passed away, he told me, "Dae, ug ma maistra naka puhon, akoy pintal sa imong blackboard"—which means, "Dae, when you become a teacher someday, I will be the one to paint your blackboard." Those words stayed with me, fueling my determination to finish my studies even when life grew difficult. Pursuing this career is my way of honoring his memory and fulfilling the dream he held

for me.

While I have worked hard to pass the board exam and become a licensed teacher, my biggest hope now is to secure a teaching item. This stability will allow me to earn enough to support Jairo's daily medications and the therapy that helps him grow. I want to use my career as a platform to show the world that special babies like my son exist and deserve to be treated with absolute dignity.

While it might seem like a small detail to some, having access to a reliable faucet and clean running water is a major goal for my family's health and well-being. Currently, we rely on well water, which often isn't clean enough for Jairo's needs because there are some frogs and other insects swimming in it that make the water not clean enough. Because he has very sensitive skin, the impurities in the water can cause him discomfort.

Securing a safe, clean water source in our home would be a life-changing improvement for us. It's about more than just convenience; it's about ensuring that Jairo stays healthy and comfortable. This is just one of the many steps I am working toward to give him the best quality of life possible, alongside his medical care and therapy. Every improvement we make to our home environment is another way of protecting him and making his world a little brighter and safer.