

One Hot, Hot, Summer

Philippines

I would like to start by stating that I feel extremely lucky to have had the opportunity to volunteer in the Philippines in the summer of 2010. I will always be grateful to Siena College and Albany Medical School for requiring each person in the eight-year Albany Medical Program to participate in a volunteer experience in a third world country in the summer after the junior year. The six weeks I spent in the Philippines was truly an eye-opening experience I will never forget.

After being in the sky for what seemed like an eternity, my good friend John Shultz and I finally landed in the Philippines in May 2010. The first thing I noticed as soon as we touched down was the heat. It was so hot, my breath was taken away. How would I be able to stand this suffocating oppression for six whole weeks? By the time we reached Tacloban City, on the island of Leyte, however, I was overcome by another feeling: awe. The landscape was breathtaking with its lush green rainforest, crystal clear water, and thick blue skies. I had arrived in paradise!



I took this picture of Tacloban City from Mt. Victor while I was hiking one day.

On closer inspection of the city that would be my home for the next month and a half, I found the paradise was not without its blemishes. Of course, I had known all along that I was entering a third-world country, but I never expected the horrific lack of hygiene and the tremendous poverty staring me

in the eye at every corner. At that moment, I knew that I was about to embark on one of the most enlightening rides of my life.



The women who ran the health clinic we volunteered in. On this day, the entire clinic took a trip to a neighboring village to perform circumcisions. After, we ate a traditional meal on the same table on which we performed the operations. Banana leaves provided a “sanitary” boundary.

The next day the “twins”, as John and I were referred to by the locals, met up with the women who worked at the Rural Health Unit (RHU) where we would be volunteering our services (see above). The staff consisted of one doctor, a registered nurse, and several midwives. These women were extremely funny and kind, and they enthusiastically invited us into their social network. Their hospitality immediately made us feel even more eager to help the sick in any way we could. Every day, except for the weekends, John and I therefore gladly traveled the thirty minutes from Tacloban to the neighboring city of Palo where the clinic was located. This daily trip was a thrill in itself since the Jeepney, seen in the picture, was our only mode of transportation. Always overflowing with boisterous people sitting on long wooden benches, these cars have never seen a seatbelt or even a window!



A Jeepney with the “conductor” in the back. He collected the fare.

Each day, we spent about four hours performing various tasks at the clinic. In addition to taking blood pressures and bringing patients to the examining rooms, we tried to take medical histories. That was often a source of amusement for the patients since we had only a very rudimentary knowledge of the local dialect. The staff always engaged us in their discussions about diagnosis, and they invited us to observe the medical procedures they performed. We watched as they did their prenatal examinations, gave injections, and carried out some dental procedures. As luck would have it, I was in the Philippines at a time when school was out. As a result, it was “circumcision” month! After having watched and even assisted in innumerable circumcisions, all done only with local anesthesia on smiling boys between the ages of 6 and 14, I feel quite confident in my ability to execute a circumcision a la Filipino style!



To the left is a picture of me taking blood pressure. I took almost 70 within an hour.

The volunteer group went on a medical mission, during which hundreds of boys were circumcised. The doctors were excellent teachers, although the technique is very different from that used in the US.



The organization we volunteered through, *Volunteer for the Visayans*, provided us with a homestay. This meant that we lived with a local family so that we would learn more about the Filipino lifestyle, customs, and language. We lived with the Vermugs, a family well known in the area for selling rice. They welcomed us with open arms and lots of food! Instead of losing weight during my stay as I had expected, I actually gained a few pounds from eating so much rice and rice and rice! I must admit that there were moments when I longed for a juicy American steak, and it would have been nice to have a vegetable once in a while. But, after a while, I began to enjoy the rice and the occasional raw egg, complete with a piece of bone or even a feather here and there!



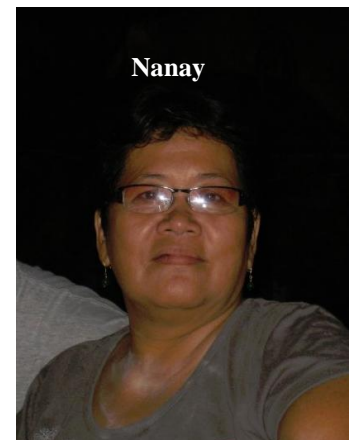
We ate our breakfast and dinner in an extremely hot room, hence the lack of clothes.

We lived with “our” mother Nanay, father Tatay, and their daughter and five grandchildren. Filipino families are extremely close nit, and even sleep together in a big bed which, given how warm it was, I found amazing.



Some of the kids we lived with.

Our experience with the Vermugs was amazing. They unconditionally embraced us into their lives and never made us feel uncomfortable about our lack of knowledge about their culture. Their attitude certainly made it much easier for us to adapt to a way of life that was so very different from what we were used to back home.



Nanay



Tatay

As we roamed the city with the locals and other volunteers, everyone seemed captivated by our presence. The children were especially social, always eager to play and show off their innumerable talents. We grew very fond of traveling to the local Astrodome, a local “hang-out” for every demographic in the area. It was there that we relaxed, played with the children, and practiced our Waray-Waray (the local dialect).



One day we stumbled upon these cheerful children playing by the water. They were very eager to play on the rocks with us and take pictures.

As another volunteer activity, we chose to participate in the “dumpsite” project one weekend. After waking up at about 4:30 AM to landfill buy fish, rice, vegetables, candy, and juice at the local market, we cooked the food with the help of some local volunteers. We brought the food to the garbage dump outside Tacloban. The dumpsite, as you can imagine, was a dump! Located on a hill, the area was filled with amazing amounts of garbage of all kinds. Unfortunately, it also employed and housed more than 40 children.



The dumpsite was exactly what you would expect with miles and miles of trash. The children were covered in dirt and most had parasitic infections on their feet.

These destitute children smiled broadly as we brought them a hot meal. It was such an uplifting experience that our group of volunteers that we decided to repeat the project and also to take a census of the children living there. The availability of this census will make it easier for the *Volunteer for the Visayans* to attempt to sponsor these children, give them a home, and put them through school.



The children turned out to be just like all the other kids that we had met in the city. They were cheerful and playful. They were kids. We realized we brought far too much food which was graciously taken in plastic bags for later.

As I look back over my six-week experience in the Philippines, I realize how it has given me a wider perspective on life. Even before the trip, I knew that I love meeting people and forming relationships with them, but I now have more compassion and understanding for people of other cultures. I am firmly convinced that in order to really consider yourself a cosmopolitan, you must live with people of other backgrounds: eat what they eat, immerse yourself in their language and customs, laugh with them, and share their problems. Having done exactly that in the Philippines, I feel like I have opened a new door and embarked on a life in which I will have a greater appreciation for the similarities all people share and for the differences we do not share. As a more empathetic and less judgmental person, I am better equipped to form the meaningful interpersonal relationships that are so crucial to a constructive doctor-patient interaction. Although I may never return to the Philippines again, I DO know that this experience has helped me be a better person and will help me become a better physician.