

The Beautiful Power of the International Bridge of Love

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Can you imagine investing six weeks of your time working, sharing meals and living side-by-side with 40 people from backgrounds reflecting a microcosm of the world? As a man, your roommates could include a Sikh graduate student, a Turkish engineer, an Australian surfer, a Palestinian Muslim scholar or an African Christian college student. As a woman, you could find yourself sharing a room with a vocal Sri Lankan activist, a compassionate Hindu social worker, a Unification Church seminarian or a dynamic Israeli grad student. For the 40 Religious Youth Service (RYS)

volunteers who were to live in Das Marinas, Cavite in the Philippines, this was the environment they had chosen to become a part of.

A Typhoon and a Presidential Visit

It was early July 1986 and the excitement of the recent nonviolent People Power Revolution was still fresh in everyone's mind. Volunteers from 36 countries made their way to a Catholic Conference Center located on the hillside outside of Greater Manila to attend an orientation before heading out to three separate destinations. The excitement that normally is generated when people come together was magnified by the diversity of the group. Even the arrival of an unwelcome visitor—a powerful typhoon—could not dampen our spirits.

The typhoon struck at the heart of the Philippines, unleashing killer winds, torrential rainfall and massive flooding. We were well-sheltered but it would not take long for us to discover some of the devastation wrought by the storm. Once the storm winds had subsided, we traveled into Manila for a special face-to-face meeting with the new President, Mrs. Cory Aquino. Packed into a bus, we made the exceptionally slow journey to the Presidential Residence, inasmuch as flood waters had covered much of the low lying areas. Peering through bus windows while riding through certain neighborhoods, we were exposed to a level of poverty many of us were unfamiliar with.

Those images of poverty faded from our memory when we were welcomed at the Presidential Residence by the gracious President. With a genuine warmth, the President offered us her attention while personally encouraging many of us. In front of the media's cameras, she publicly thanked us for coming to “serve her country with a heart of kindness and concern.” We remembered her words as inspiration when we faced some of the challenges that lay ahead of us.

When we returned to our bus and drove through the flooded regions, we were again visually reminded of the difficulties that faced so many of the citizens of this country. Our hearts began to feel a deeper concern for the new President and the many challenges that would be facing her.

The Community of Das Marinas



After our orientation we were divided into three teams of 40 volunteers, with one team traveling to Das Marinas, Cavite, a community where we would encounter “Lady Poverty” face-to-face. This coastal community had recently gone through an upheaval, receiving many newly arrived residents—families forcibly removed from poorer sections of Manila. During the recent unrest, the former government worried that urban overcrowding was a recipe for insurgence and acted in its own self-interest by removing many of those citizens to areas like Das Marinas. The move resulted in Das Marinas suffering

from a spike in unemployment that left many of the new arrivals in a desperate struggle to feed their families.

Those newly arrived in Das Marinas chose to settle in areas that divided along religious lines. Muslims lived on one side of a stream while the larger Christian population occupied housing on the other side. The Muslim and Christian communities existed in a relationship that was not openly hostile but it was nevertheless brimming with strong undercurrents of distrust. In other words, a common purpose was needed in Das Marinas to pull the divided community together.

Soon after our team arrived in Das Marinas, we naturally made observations and comparisons. One thing we noticed while walking the narrow neighborhood streets was clusters of undernourished children playing group games with makeshift balls. It appeared that the children were constantly discovering ways to play by using whatever could be found or imagined to create games and other fun activities. Despite the poverty, laughter played a part in most people's days.

Daily Cultural Challenges

Certain inevitable challenges arose within our diverse community. The process of finding norms that a group can call their own is important in building a community. Our diverse team of volunteers hailed from a wide variety of cultural, religious, ethnic, economic and educational backgrounds. We arrived in the Philippines with different mindsets and attitudes and soon discovered that we could easily differ in the ways we did things.

Keeping time was one clear example of our differing standards. Being on time meant something very different for the English and Swiss participants than it did for the Nigerians and Brazilians. We often struggled to make a consensus on what "on time" meant, but even though some agreement was reached, there was still no guarantee that it would work when we mixed in with the local community. It took time to understand how to be "on time."

Another experience in mixing cultural norms came as we offered greetings to people we were meeting. We all like to give and receive a greeting when meeting a person, but what kind of greeting would it be? A typical greeting from a Venezuelan man offered to men and women would be a kiss on both cheeks. For Muslim women, receiving a kiss from an unrelated male was a big shock, since it is prohibited. Bows were given to people who offered outstretched hands, and hugs given to those that preferred bows. We had to learn from each other, which entailed practicing forgiveness, while we strained to view life through each other's eyes.

Though our cultural upbringing differed, we shared one great unifying element—our desire to serve those in "our" communities. Having something important to work for allowed us to see beyond many cultural challenges.

Building Bridges

The plan for the members of our team initially focused on helping construct a small bridge across a local stream. The stream inadvertently served as the line of demarcation between the Muslim and Christian sections of town. The work of building the bridge required that we establish a close cooperation with engineering students and faculty from the local campus of the Technical University of the Philippines (TUP).



We were fortunate to have TUP students and faculty as partners because they freely shared their technical skills as well as eagerly offering us insights into the local culture. The labor we were tasked with was largely done by hand under a severe tropical sun. We could have easily found things to complain about but the cheerful and diligent example of the engineering students helped to neutralize most of our negativity.

In the late afternoon, our volunteers typically rushed to leave the worksite as soon as our watches told us it was quitting time. The faculty engineers and the students often remained reviewing with concerned eyes the on-site situation. They chose to remain for as long it took to improve our work and prepare things for the next day. These University representatives provided skills, energy, smiles and encouragement to each of us. We were proud to be their friends.

The Community Responds

How do you think the community responded to our large group of foreigners working in their community? As we dug, mixed cement, and relayed dirt and bricks while sharing conversation and songs, the construction site increasingly became the source of entertainment for the local children. Initially it was the curious children from the Christian sector near the construction site that came to watch. After a short

period, they began to interact with some of the foreigners.

News spread quickly in the small community even though it lacked telephones. Before long, the children from the Muslim sector began to join the growing number of children that hung around the worksite. Muslim and Christian children were filled with equal curiosity as they shared a longing for something new and interesting. The situation provided an opportunity for them to get to know children whom they hadn't known very well before.

Within days, the women from both sides of the stream came to our worksite, in part searching for their children but also to satisfy their own curiosity. After seeing how we were laboring intensely, they quickly decided to get involved by bringing drinks to quench our thirst. The women also offered words of encouragement and their simple laughter, which was a good way to lift our hearts.

Yet, for some in the community we continued to remain a curiosity, one to be either avoided or simply stared at. It was not long before many of the men in the community were asking themselves various questions about the group. Some wondered why a doctor from the very poor country of Bangladesh had come to Das Marinas when there was so much work to be done in his own country. Others questioned the motivation of the group and those who were a part of it.

Why are you here?

For some of the men in the community, it was hard to imagine foreigners coming to the Philippines to do hard labor instead of enjoying the beaches and other attractions. With a mixture of paternal care and macho pride, they would socialize and discuss their thoughts until these critics finally arrived at the consensus that we were in the community for the right reasons.



So, at this point the men began to make their way to the worksite. Those men were coming from both the Christian and Muslim sectors of the community. We noticed that, after engaging in separate side conversations, small teams of men began to grab our shovels and place themselves in the middle of the construction efforts. One representative citizen said, "This is our community and we want to help." A new level of cooperation had begun.

Children, mothers and fathers from the Christian and Muslim sectors of the community were meeting at our construction site. The construction of the bridge became our shared goal. Our combined efforts were creating a sense of solidarity, whereas division had previously been the norm. Noticing the changes of attitude among us, one of our Philippine RYS members, Elizabeth Mendoza, shared that this little bridge built by these many hands was truly "The International Bridge of Love." Soon a song was written about the International Bridge of Love, which has remained so ever since.

The Imam, Bishop and Governor Together Inaugurate the Bridge

As our experience in Das Marinas progressed, the structural design of the bridge was finalized. We continued to do cement and iron work but, in time, that work was nearly complete. We decided that the bridge deserved a show of color. So, in the remaining days, we painted it with coats of yellow and black paint. On inspection, it looked like it was properly dressed for its inauguration.

In our closing days as we were wrapping up our work, we often paused to serenade anyone who would listen (as well as some who were not listening) with the ballad of the International Bridge of Love. Proud of what we had done together, we were excited to show her off and sing her praises.

The inauguration of the bridge was a major event. The Roman Catholic Bishop, the local Imam, the Governor and RYS Director Rev. Hose were all planning to be part of the ribbon-cutting ceremony. Many hundreds of local residents would be there to share in the festivities. The bridge waited, properly dressed in freshly painted colors of yellow and black.

The occasion of the inauguration was a call for celebration. Rev. David Hose, a generous man, took all the personal money he had brought with him and walked around to purchase every ice cream cup and cone that was available from the local shops. Many of us happily distributed the ice cream to the hundreds of children and adults who gathered for the ribbon-cutting ceremony. Although ice cream doesn't take long to eat, for those who have it so rarely, it would remain a sweet memory.



The air was electric with the excitement of the crowd as we inched closer to the formal ceremony. Gathered at the front entrance of the bridge were the spiritual and secular leaders of the community. Crowds gathered close to the Bishop who was dressed in his traditional robes and offered paternal smiles to the religiously diverse audience awaiting his opening remarks. The Imam, as a co-celebrant, looked a little more nervous. He quietly acknowledged those who were joining this event and seemed grateful that it was a prayer and not a speech that he was expected to deliver. The governor understood how to use the opportunity of having an audience and emanated a warm friendliness that political leaders often master.

The visual display before us offered an overwhelming image that was, in fact, spiritually uplifting. The recently divided community was crowding together as one body—happy, proud and open to a brighter future. The RYS spiritual director, Rev. Hose, joined hands with the local leaders to cut the ribbon. As the ribbon fell away and slowly dropped to the ground, so also, it seemed, had the barriers that divided the community. We were wrapped in the feeling of an overwhelming sense of accomplishment.

How do You Measure Value?

The physical bridge that we built was a valuable asset to the community. By building it, the children and the general population gained easier access to the school and the local markets. More children would be able to continue their schooling as a result.

However, something less visible had also taken place during our month in Das Marinas. A divided community was beginning to share respect and trust as neighbors saw each other with new eyes. We, a motley group of young adults, representatives of the religions and nations of the world, had helped achieve this metaphysical healing. Such was the legacy of the International Bridge of Love.