

Melinda's Heart – part 1

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The Heart of Service

“A good heart is better than all the heads in the world.” – Edward Bulwer-Lytton



The early morning heat so common in the poor Philippine community of Das Marinas served as a realistic reminder of the past five weeks of sweaty labor that our international team of volunteers had undertaken. Looking at the colorful, freshly painted structure that was soon to be inaugurated as the International Bridge of Love, I was feeling rather proud of what we were able to accomplish.

Thoughts of our everyday challenges were fresh as the sight of the bridge brought vivid reminders of how hard we had worked as individuals and as a community. The mixing and moving of tons of cement, the constant landscaping, assisting the young Philippine engineers, all our shared efforts focused on the construction of a much needed community bridge. We were sojourners from 16 countries, volunteers from a wide range of religious and cultural backgrounds, members of a program called the Religious Youth

Service (RYS). We came with the hope that we would do be doing something to create happiness in people's lives.

Creating a model for communities

Eyeing the concrete structure of 'our' little bridge served as a measure of the progress we had made through our labor. In my mind's eye, I thought a more subtle and profound measure of progress could be observed in how our sense of community had expanded. We initially arrived in Das Marinas as strangers, for many it was the first time traveling to a new country, for some it was the first extended stay away from home and family. From morning to night our group lived, slept, worked and ate together. Strangers were transformed into friends, and friends became as close as family members.

Despite our external differences which were many, we maintained a mutual respect for the spiritual values that made us who we were. Coming from so many different countries and backgrounds stimulated us to consciously invest in building personal relationships. Somehow, we gradually grew to gain a sense that our community was like a global family. This feeling was facilitated by our sharing a noble vision, maintaining that vision helped us commit to a lifestyle that was true to our highest values.

If Das Marinas is the norm, then the Philippine people are very warm and friendly. We came as Sikh's, Jews, Muslims, Christian's, Buddhists and Jains but we were in a short time adopted as members of the Das Marinas community. Standing at the sight of the International Bridge of Love, it was clear to me that the experiences here had powerfully transformed heart and minds and helped us grow our sense of community.

A Heart to Serve More



Looking at the International Bridge of Love on this the final day in Das Marinas brought to me an assortment of feelings. Soon the governor, the bishop and a local imam would join the community in a ribbon cutting ceremony an officially open the bridge. That was exciting. Yet, despite the excitement, a cloud of melancholy hung over us as we began to grasp the reality of our approaching departure from this community we had grown to love. For some, the anxiety was especially difficult.

Melinda was one of those that were having an especially difficult day. A bright, slender, college graduate from Iowa, Melinda knew well the

ways and lifestyle of Middle America. For this All-American girl on her first international experience, arriving at Das Marinas provided her with face to face challenges that she never expected. It was her ability to creatively adjust physically, mentally and emotionally that helped turn those challenges into a life enriching experience.

Originally, our job in Das Marinas was explained to us by a project director as having to help construct a small bridge. Melinda took part in the bridge building tasks and was a member of the "bucket brigade" a long line of eager volunteers that passed dirt and cement across a sloping terrain. While she willingly contributing to the physical work she saw other opportunities, ones that would more fully express her heart of care and concern.

Melinda soon realized that her joy was multiplied when she spontaneously shared with the people of the community. During her busy days, Melinda managed to find time for conversations with mothers in front of their homes or initiate an exchange of ideas with a Philippine college student or visit and present some special offering for the children at the local primary school. In these things she invested great care and made a significant contribution.

Through her interactions in the community, Melinda learned about issues and challenges that confronted local families. She was surprised to discover that many of the lady engineer students who worked with us would soon leave their homes for jobs as maids in Hong Kong or a wealthy Gulf nation. The weight of debt and the lack of good local employment opportunities created a situation where they choose to postpone dreams of a career or family for the lonely job of a domestic servant in a foreign county. Melinda was deeply moved.

Melinda's friendly smile and palpable concern permitted her to open doors in the community that would not have ordinarily been opened. She received invitations from radio stations for her and members of the group to speak. Some of us could slip away from the worksite during breaks and share a snack with local families because she had been there first. Melinda visited community schools and made presentations with small groups of our international volunteers and during those visits the children's faces often filled with smiles and the classrooms boomed with laughter.

Through her trips to school, the visits to homes and especially in listening to the mothers, Melinda grew to understand that many of the girls she meet would prematurely leave school because of economic hardship. Too soon these smiling, bright children would be pushed out of school into some numbing form of low paying menial work. Melinda began to dream of better things for these girls.