

Clean Water: A Life-Saving Mission

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“Believe that life is worth living and your belief will help create the fact.” William James

A Life Worth Living

From thirty-six nations a vibrant group of 120 RYS volunteers poured into Manila to prepare for an experience in service and cross-cultural cooperation. After an initial five-day stay in the busy municipality, we were anxious to journey to the locations where we would live and serve. The group was subdivided into three teams of 40 and our team headed north to the province of Pampanga.

On the six-hour road trek, we passed through miles and miles of countryside blanketed by rice fields. Farmers and their oxen toiled in these fields most of their daylight hours to prepare for the upcoming harvest. At the summit of one small mountain we stopped our vans to take in the panorama. We gazed into the valley and enjoyed the visual feast of blue sky, palm trees, and green rice fields. We were awestruck by the timeless beauty of the landscape.

“We Need Clean Water!”



Aphalite was the name of the barong (village) where, for the next month, we would live, work and make ourselves a temporary home. It was crowded with small, tightly clustered homes that were separated by narrow dirt pathways. Economically poor, with sizeable areas lacking basic plumbing, the village overflowed with children. Like many communities in poorer areas, Aphalit struggled to maintain an adequate supply of clean water.

Prior to our arrival, Mr. Abalone, the director of a coalition of local civic organizations, described to RYS Project Director Michael Giampoli how recent overcrowding was putting pressure on their limited water resources. Mr. Abalone, in requesting our assistance, made the community’s needs clear, “What we need are more clean water wells and additional toilet areas that can be shared by neighboring families.” With little hesitation, a handshake sealed the agreement. RYS would send 40 volunteers and provide material resources to help support the community.

Despite the difficult living environment for many of the residents, there was a strong spirit expressing vitality within the community that was encouraged by various civic leaders. While cooperation and mutual support were part of the community ethic, the villagers were facing problems that were beyond their capability. RYS assistance could make a difference.

The work to bring additional clean water to Aphalit required cooperation and it was clearly a joint effort. Local support teams, community members and even neighboring children joined in. We would spend five labor-intensive weeks pushing through multiple challenges in order to accomplish our goal of 16 new water wells and six toilet facilities, serving more than 100 families with clean drinking water and healthy sanitation. For some of our volunteers, what we learned in the process of completing our work would prove life-changing.

The Challenges of Digging for Fresh Water



On the first morning, we gathered at the various locations where the wells were to be dug. One volunteer, Bruce, towered tall and lean above a crowd while his friendly manner and sharp insights helped him to stand out. Born in Germany, he later migrated to Canada but still carried in his spoken English traces of his origin. To the children of our community he appeared as a friendly giant for he often came to work with sweet treats in his pocket that he readily shared.

It was still early when we finished preparing the tools and reviewing safety tips. We began shoveling at various tempos, but some of us became overanxious and shoveled at a near-frantic pace. The air soon became filled with multiple shovels that removed the more compliant layers of soil closer to the surface. In the opening hours, our progress was impressive as teams dug three to four feet deep. Everything seemed to be going fine.

When the digging progressed deeper than four feet, water started to seep back into our newly dug holes. With an enthusiastic obliviousness, we chose to ignore the implications of the seepage and simply continued to dig. As lunchtime approached, we stopped work and walked to the community center to enjoy a simple meal while conversing about the outstanding progress we were making. On returning to the worksite, we were startled to discover that the previously empty holes were now full of water.



Not to be deterred, several volunteers jumped back into the holes and filled buckets with water and wet soil. Water seepage was not going to stop them! Yet, despite their best efforts, it did not take long for the volume of muddy soil removed to be replaced by an equal volume of water. Frustration was growing because we needed to dig wide holes to the depth of eight feet as a foundation to install a hand drill.

For many of the villager onlookers, the sight of our team of muddy men and women working to empty continuously flooding holes must have appeared mildly insane. You can imagine the whispers: “They traveled across the world for this? They should have stayed home and saved us the trouble of filling up those ridiculous holes!”

After an hour of fruitless effort, we decided to take a break. Bruce sought out a local civic leader and they talked through the situation and came up with a simple but effective idea. “Let’s rent pumps and pump the holes clean so we can get the job done.” Pumps were rented and by late morning of the second work day, the holes were empty of water. The plan was effective and managed to save us from ourselves.

With the holes pumped dry, the digging progressed smoothly until we reached a depth where the shovels were no longer effective. Manually powered drills were then installed and hand pumping those drills was now our main job. Each drill had an eight-foot-long pole that served to provide leverage in turning the drill. Four workers could squeeze tightly together and push the pole down. This allowed the drilling to inch its way deeper into the ground. It would take weeks to reach the clean water at a depth of 80 feet.

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Imagine yourself pumping away each day under the scorching tropical sun. Predictably, the excitement of the initial day’s work wore thin as our aches, pains and physical and mental fatigue grew. We began to question the value of what we were doing, expressing diminishing confidence. “Should I have stayed

home and taken that job where I could earn good money, enjoy my summer nights and relax with friends? Why is this manual digging for clean water so important?"

Bruce was not immune to questioning and would later share what he thought during that crucial time. "I took clean water and good sanitation for granted. Back home I just turned on a faucet and clean water would flow out. If I flushed a toilet, I knew that the dirty water would be treated. It was only upon discovering the danger that people in Aphalit faced that I understood why our work was a matter of life and death."



As we continued our efforts at the work site, we became accustomed to certain daily routines. One of the routines had to do with the children since they gathered around us from the moment we arrived to the time we departed. To those children, our coming was exciting, and that excitement lasted from one day to the next. Often they laughed at us, some sang children's songs and many tried to help us by carrying water or tools. The youngest simply encouraged us with smiles.

One child, a young girl named Elizabeth, came daily to Bruce's work area. Elizabeth enjoyed singing and often sang and laughed with her friends. After a brief period, she overcame her shyness and started approaching the tall German man with a smiling face. At times she would pull on his shirt to see if he had brought a special treat. Elizabeth was like so many special children that fill the villages of our world.

Elizabeth's large family lived in a crowded house, in a crowded section of town that suffered from limited access to clean water. The recent typhoon had caused drainage problems and raw sewage poured into the water supply, making it vulnerable to waterborne disease. Tragic consequences can result from drinking tainted water.

After our first full week of work, Bruce and the team spent a Sunday on the coast swimming. The change of scenery was refreshing for all of us and we returned to Aphalit reinvigorated. When our Monday morning bus approached the work site dozens of children were waiting to give us an exciting welcome.

The morning hours came and went when Bruce realized little Elizabeth was not around. Bruce queried, "Where is Elizabeth, does anyone know? Has anyone seen her?" Those from the neighborhood began to look at each other nervously. Awkwardly one spoke, "Mr. Bruce, didn't you hear? Elizabeth got sick, very sick. She died this weekend at the hospital. She got there too late. She got cholera from the bad water. Cholera kills quickly."

Bruce, raised in a land of clean drinking water, could not accept this report. He could not, or would not, grasp the insanity of a four-year-old girl dying as a result of drinking water. He was staggered, as if a big wave crashed through his body and swept away all feeling, leaving only emptiness. Then a second wave followed, one which filled him with anger. When this wave diminished, it was followed by waves of profound sadness, the kind of sadness that only the passing of time can shake off.

Over and over again, Bruce asked himself the question, "Why?"

Clarifying the Things I Can Do

The days and weeks passed and children continued to watch, share and play with Bruce and the team. In our hearts all the children became Elizabeth's family. Bruce continued to appear as a friendly giant for the children but deep within he was wrestling to understand more fully the purpose of his life. A voiceless inquiry repeated within his questioning mind, "What can we do to prevent what happened to Elizabeth from happening to other children? What can I do?"

In the special quiet moments when personal determination is forged, Bruce found himself going through a process of clarification and commitment. He moved his thoughts from the initial questions of why the tragedy had happened to a point where he saw what needed to be done and, furthermore, how he was going to do it. He had found solace in his new determination. "I will do something to make a difference in other children's lives."

Elizabeth's death had an impact on us all. Before our journey, cholera was a disease found in history books. It spoke to our minds of centuries past—overcrowded tenement housing, wartime army camps, tropical canal building. No longer a strange and distant disease, cholera took on the horror of a living memory, being a part of the daily reality of the children we cared for.

We continued our work to supply the community with clean water with a renewed sense of purpose. Before leaving Aphalit, we had dug 16 wells which supplied drinking water and cleaning facilities for the community. We now knew in our hearts and minds how important this clean water was for preserving the quality of life in the community. All of us had a sense of satisfaction that we had chosen to make this project our summer's priority.

If I Die Tomorrow, My Life Has Been Worth Living

Before returning home, all 120 volunteers gathered for a time of reflection and sharing. Bruce volunteered to share some of the thoughts and feelings he had been holding inside. He moved to the microphone on stage and paused for a few moments, staring at the faces in front of him.

Slowly and deliberately, he tried to present his words in ways that everyone could follow. In a strong clear, voice he began with a proclamation, "If I die tomorrow, my life has been worth living."

A deep silence filled the room as Bruce continued, "The things we did this summer have shown me what life is about. When I came to the Philippines, I didn't know how valuable my life was but I discovered my value through a little four-year-old girl, Elizabeth. Elizabeth, my little friend, was so much like the healthy niece I have back home. Unlike my niece, Elizabeth's life was cut short because she drank dirty water."

"We were too late for Elizabeth but we are not too late for the other children of the community. The work we did here will save lives. This is the most important thing I have ever done in my life. If I die tomorrow, my life has been worth living because of what I was able to do here."

Bruce smiled, "Don't get me wrong, I do want to live and am not planning an early departure, but now I am determined to make more of a difference in people's lives. I want to thank you all for your efforts and support in making a difference in so many people's lives."

Bruce stepped off the stage as his words settled into our hearts and minds. A silent whisper echoed in our midst—"Yes, I can make a difference in people's lives; I will make a difference in someone's life, I will."