

Seeing the Philippines Through Feed the Hungry

By Cayan Topacio

Going back to the Philippines with the Feed the Hungry group is like light passing through a prism. The result is a rainbow of unpredictable colorful experiences.

My first trip took me to Aklan to a municipality named New Washington. Being from the State of Washington I found the coincidence quite amusing. Aklan is host to the Ati-atihan festival. At the north-west tip of the province you can catch a pump boat for a short ride to Boracay. Lush, verdant, and more rural than provinces near Manila, Aklan was refreshing to see. We were there to implement gift-giving.

The Mayor and his wife held true to Filipino hospitality. They were cordial, gracious, and insightful as they explained the history and socio-economic conditions of the town. They arranged to have a student from the technical school demonstrate how *bangus*, a prime export, was deboned.

As I watched the young lady remove the dorsal fin and skillfully use forceps to pry intermuscular spines off the hapless fish, all I could think of was the gap in the technical education of young people in the Philippines and the rest of the world. I thought to myself that while our young student was learning to pick spines off a fish, some other young person in Japan, Korea or the United States was learning genetic engineering and would someday breed species of boneless Bangus. Clearly, global competition was an afterthought in Aklan.

Nevertheless, we had a wonderful time. Driving along the coast, we stopped at the Mayor's favorite roadside *carinderia* to eat fresh seafood. By the end of our visit we concluded we were getting more from them than what we brought. Their gifts to us surpassed what we had given to the children of the municipality.

On my second trip with Feed the Hungry, I found myself at Guimaras Island, southwest of Panay. A few days later, I was headed north to Banaue, Ifugao and Sagada, Mountain Province.

Guimaras Island is renowned for its mangoes. With deep disappointment, we learned the delicious Philippine mangoes got as far as the U.S. territories of the Mariana Islands and Guam, with a few reaching



the U.S. mainland. Someday they told us our U.S. neighborhood grocery stores would have them. We pined for that moment and then pro-

ceeded to focus on our mission of gift-giving.

Almost 200 children showed up at the community center. Many were malnourished and ill. A noticeable high number were developmentally disabled. It was heart-wrenching. We left depressed and frustrated that we could do so little for them.

Two years after our visit, Guimaras suffered an ecological disaster from a tanker oil spill. Pristine beaches and abundant

marine life were decimated. Prospects for environmental recovery were reported to be generations away.

Heading north to the



mountain provinces was a nice change where the topography, temperature, and vegetation were different. My excitement of viewing the magnificent rice terraces was tempered by signs posted by the UNESCO World Heritage Center warning of site deterioration and endangerment.

At the Banaue community center we were met by the Governor and several hundred children. I am partial to the Igorot children. I think they have the most beautiful smiles in the whole archipelago. Our gift-giving activity was well received by everyone.



In February of this year, I joined several FTH volunteers on a trip to Calauit Island, part of the Calamianes group in northern Palawan. These islands are home to the indigenous Tagbanuas. We brought school supplies, books, dictionaries, world atlas, paper, pencils and grant money to pay for garden tools.

There are many ways to get to Calauit Island from Busuanga and none are easy. We opted to travel over unpaved dusty roads for three hours and then a twenty minute pump boat ride. The island is promoted by the tourism industry for its unusual nature preserve where African animals such as giraffes, zebras, bushbucks, elands, impalas graze freely and co-exist with endemic species such as the Calamian deer, Palawan peacock pheasant, Palawan bearcat, crocodile and wild pig.

The story of how the African animals got on the island was bitterly told to us by the Tagbanuas who were dislocated in 1976. Through a presidential decree, Marcos established the reserve by ordering the evacuation and resettlement of the residents to another island. When the Aquino government took power, the residents came back only to face gunfire from government troops. Today they are still in a legal quagmire struggling to establish their indigenous rights to the land.

Weeks after our departure, a volunteer teacher at Calauit Island sent us an email describing the effect of our visit. She noted that prior to our arrival most of the children on the island drew blank stares when asked what they wanted to be in the future. Now many reply someday they will be doctors, engineers and teachers, just like the Filipino visitors from the U.S.

I believe this is the essence of Feed the Hungry. It is a program that gives the gift of hope. In the Philippines where 44 percent are still living on \$2 a day, hope is a powerful force. There is hope the country will progress economically. There is hope that its natural resources and environment will be protected. There is hope that social justice will find the indigenous people. There is hope that a better life means not leaving the country. Feed the Hungry ensures the flame of hope is not extinguished.