

“The Medical Mission Experience”

David Gutierrez

The Philippines National Coast Guard had not given our group any signs of leaving of Rapu Rapu. The weather conditions still appeared unsatisfactory, almost reminiscent of the kind that had brought hurricanes just weeks earlier, for any of the fishermen’s boats to make the trip back to the mainland. Yet, if not for those few extra days of being on the island, I would have never had the opportunity to meet Karla. A single mother with three children and caretaker of her own mother, she had maintained her optimism and strength despite the recent hurricane disasters. After my encounters with Karla and others like her, I had finally come to realize that pursuing medicine was my calling.

During my medical mission in the Philippines, I was able to follow several medical professionals in their line of work. On a typical day, I would go with Doctor Joseph Carabeo, or Doc Jojo as we called him, on his rounds in the hospital and afterwards visit the “shanty towns” nearby. Specifically, while shadowing the doctor during his open clinic in the disaster stricken province of Rapu Rapu, I found myself determined to make a



poverty and its effect on young children. Seeing the kind of difference the doctor made for those people truly inspired me to do so. Unlike the clinical settings I experienced in the US, most of our visits were in the locals' homes, a majority of which were small shacks or places under a bridge. Like Karla, many of these people showed me what it means to persevere despite their impoverished living conditions. I came to realize the dramatic differences in healthcare between the U.S. and other third world countries, such as the environment for providing such healthcare and even the technology available in these places. While I knew I could not possibly fix all the problems with poverty or health disparities in my own or other countries, I was inspired to make a difference through engaging with public health and medical issues.



The things I have learned and experienced from being abroad will help me reach my ultimate goal of becoming a physician. While my schooling and research have taught me much about science and the clinical setting, nothing has ever taught me more about myself than my experiences in the Philippines. Places like Rapu Rapu have given me a broader worldview of healthcare, increased my resolve to engage in direct patient care, developed my advocacy to always lend a helping hand, and inspired me to become a leader in the public healthcare field through policy making and administrative work. I can only hope that some day in my own career as a physician I can provide the same care and compassion for others that I have been able to witness from people like Doc Jojo or the faculty I continue to work with today.



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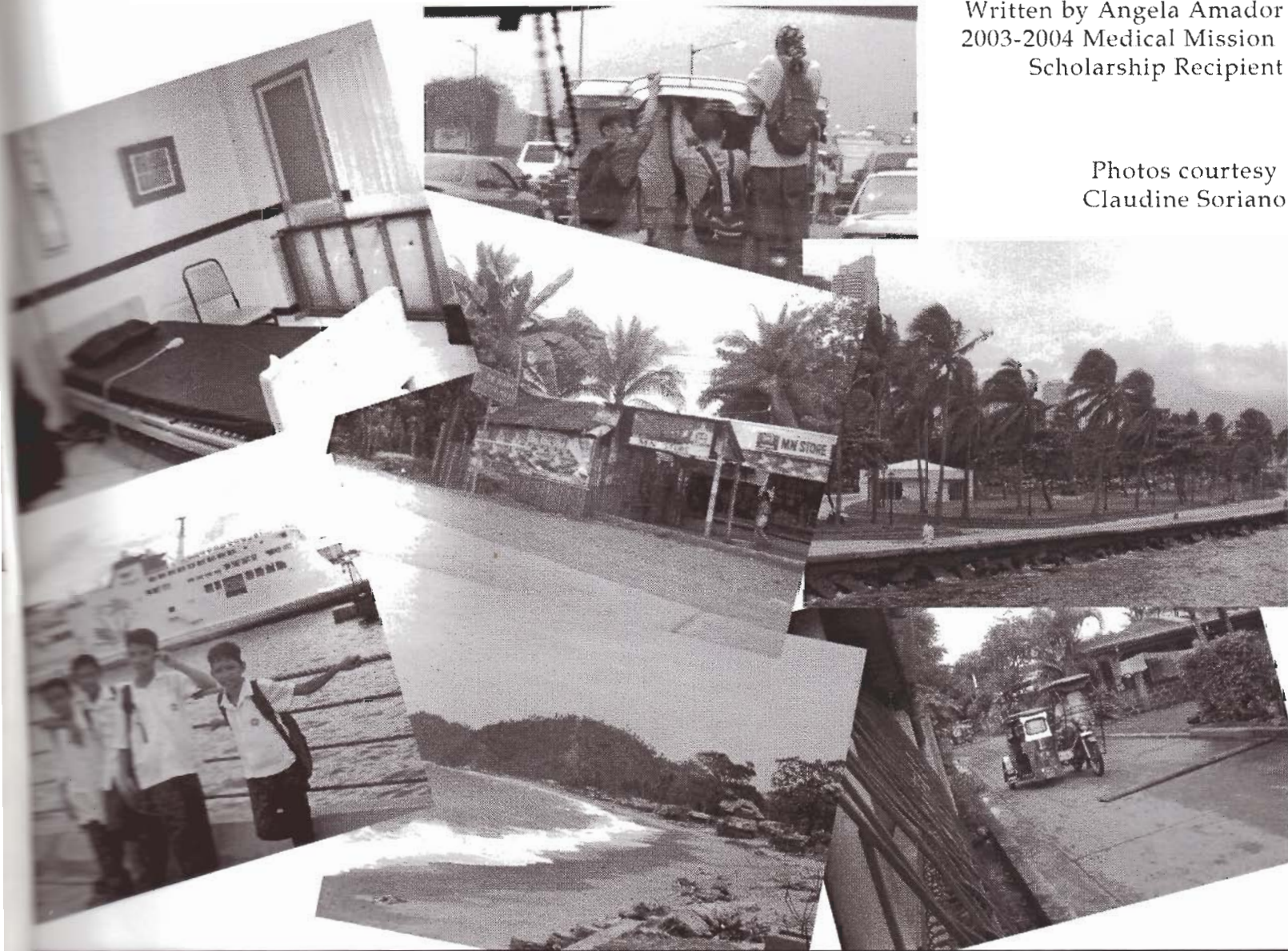
Through Their Eyes

Friday, August 27, 2004

It's easier to live life if all you know are the things that surround you. Your problems are all you know. Your troubles are all you know. Your life is all you know. But what happens when you learn someone else's problems? Someone else's struggles? Someone else's life? Can you turn your back and just pretend like you never came face to face with them? Do you devote your whole life to their struggle? Should you do anything at all? It's hard to say right now--especially for me. All I can say is I've seen some things. If you want to open your heart...see other people's struggles besides those that surround you. You'll see some things.

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Photos courtesy
Claudine Soriano



Embracing the Cause

When I made the decision to go to the Philippines

for two months, my parents were surprised at my eagerness to visit. It being my first time in the Philippines, I was a bit apprehensive at the thought of going without my family, but the sense of purpose gave me more than one reason to travel 7,000 miles to the land where my parents call home. At the airport, the constant reminder from my Auntie Cristy to watch my purse, stay in groups, and to not drink the water made me want to get to the Philippines and do what I came accomplish and learn.

The first 6 weeks of my stay in the Philippines was at UP Diliman for the Philippine Studies Program, which was my compacted attempt to learn as much Tagalog, Philippine dance, art, music as I could for the month and a half I was on campus. I also felt it slowly prepared me for the venture that lay before me with the trips to Hacienda Luisita, Smokey Mountain, elementary schools and different areas of the Philippines. On these fieldtrips, we saw the side of the Philippines that is not advertised in brochures and commercials that are full of white sand beaches and tourists lying out in the sun. We saw the reality of the Philippines, the side of the Philippines that you see when service groups on Saturday afternoon commercials ask for donations to help feed and care for people in developing countries. The sides of the Philippines that you don't realize exists until you see, touch, hear, and smell for yourself. When at Smokey Mountain, we came upon a 4 year-old girl named Ivy who was enjoying herself playing with some smoothed-down metal scraps. It made me think of all of the toys that I used to play with when I was little and made me think about what you really need to make you happy. This is just one of the many examples of my experience that has changed me forever.

By the end of my stay at UP Diliman, I was anxious to start my Medical Mission. My 1st day, I was put right into the middle of everything. I had the opportunity to join in on a rally with CHD (Council for Health and Development), an NGO that advocates for the need of health care. The rally happened to be on the hottest day of the week, while marching down the busiest street in Quezon City. The rally was Anti-GMA, and everyone was protesting for various reasons, but CHD's reasoning was that only 1.5% of the nation's budget is spent on healthcare. Seventy-five people a day die in the Philippines due to tuberculosis.

Another opportunity I had while on my mission was to visit a tuberculosis clinic in Tondo called Cannosa Medical Clinic. At this specific health clinic, they treat TB patients and have daily feeding programs for their patients. I had the chance to observe the doctors give their check-ups for their patients, and even got to participate in the yearly parade on TB awareness. The parade ended in the housing area of

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Smokey Mountain. We passed out food to the children, and information on TB and TB prevention to the adults in the housing projects. I think the best time that I had there at the clinic was playing with the children in the playground, probably because I didn't even have to communicate to them with the language. Knowing how to play doesn't have to involve words. This was definitely a plus for me because my Tagalog was definitely suffering. =)

One conversation that I remember vividly is one that I had with a young doctor at the rally. He was a part-time doctor at a hospital where they don't pay him much. He also worked in clinics in various provinces. We also talked about current politics and the current situation of doctors training to become nurses so that they may move to the States in order to make more money for their family. He did not want to train to become a



THROUGH THE EYES OF A FOREIGNER Children wanting a chance to take a look at the camera.

nurse because he had invested so much time and money to become a doctor, even though his family didn't fully support him. When we talked about politics, he said something that stuck with me: "I was never really into politics before all of this, but the way to get the people aware is to relate it to something that matters to them."

Towards the end of my mission, I visited a small barangay behind the UP Diliman campus. There was a dispute with the land, and those who are living on it do not own the land and were threaten to be kicked off if not evacuated. One thing that was surprising to me was that this community was very pro-active in their situation. Many of the women of the community were the leaders of their community and even trained as the health educators of their barangay. This one woman I met had even created her own herbal garden to supplement the needs of the community. Natural and indigenous medicines are turned to when Western medicines are too expensive to obtain. It was so inspiring to see the spirits of the people of this barangay continue to stay strong, regardless of the trials and tribulations they currently to face.

Of all of the reasons for my wanting to go to the Philippines: learning Tagalog, understanding the culture in which my parents grew up, connecting to my Filipino roots, learning and being able to do something for my community is something about my experience in the Philippines that has had the strongest hold on me. We do not live in separate communities where our paths never cross. I learned that my community is not limited to what is here in the U.S, but extends to the Philippines. Though an ocean separates us, improvement starts with one step in the right direction. My experiences in the Philippines on my medical mission will influence who I become in the future and the course

I direct my life into. I realized that through struggle, there is still beauty. A beauty that cannot be destroyed because it is deeply rooted in those who still can find something to be thankful for when they have nothing at all.

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