

With Love From the Philippines

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When I was the director of the Assumption Lay Volunteer Program (ALVP) I would often say that we sent volunteers overseas yet each one would return as a missionary to the UK. What did I mean by this? Well, I believe it speaks not so much of the generous individuals becoming evangelists whilst overseas but more of the growth of realisation of the greater and more important things in life; people, relationships, and the socio-economic realities of the people over materialism. These individuals became even more committed to “making a difference in their small sphere” (St. Marie Eugenie Milleret) a difference back in their homelands.



It says on my visa that I am a missionary here in the Philippines and yet I also know that for the last 2.5 years I am the one who has been blessed, blessed by the people who have allowed me to journey with them in many small ways. So let me share a little of that journey together.

The Philippines is a country of great paradoxes; the gulf between the rich and the poor exists intimately with the tragedy and pain which poverty binds them to it. Yet it is unequivocal and undeniable that their faith embraces them with a joy that does not seem to exist in the rich West. As a foreigner here it is this joy in the midst of all the many hardships that challenges me to the core of my being and has shaped the person I have become.

I came to the Philippines on sabbatical from my job in ALVP after seven years service. It was a move that I hoped would allow me new experiences, challenges and friendships and indeed it did. When I first arrived I was given two main roles; one was to set up a volunteer program for the [Virilanie Foundation](#) ([Virilane Youtube video](#)) which is one of the largest NGOs that works with street children and secondly, with the Entrepreneurs School of Asia (ESA) as a special projects coordinator. The latter role was especially exciting for me given I had no experience in business and I was interested to explore the idea that it could be used as a tool for development. This is especially poignant here given that over 90% of the population make their living through small micro-enterprises yet, over half of these fail due to lack of education and financial capital.

ESA has truly been my greatest challenge for so many reasons, and yet it has also provided me with a certain freedom to learn and to direct community development programmes which I can now look back upon and say have begun to have an impact upon many people, *err* I hope!

ESA is also unique as all students must have successful businesses up and running in order to graduate and so each one leaves an employer not an employee. I myself only teach in the school one day a week through the experiential learning classes which are designed to inject a sense of socio-economic justice and equality within all of its students. My main role however, was the setting up of a

foundation for ESA called the Institute for Social Entrepreneurship Education (I4SEE), a vehicle dedicated to designing and implementing Integrated Community Development Programmes for poor communities and as well as facilitating Internships for international students.

One example of these programmes is called the Teenpreneur Challenge (TC). TC was designed to both jump start the productivity of poor communities and to instil within high school students basic social entrepreneurial skills, values and attributes as well as a greater sense of the socio-economic reality of others.

Teenpreneur is a 12 week programme that incorporates lectures and workshops, community visits and most importantly commitment to the poor community. It is a real challenge to everyone who participates and to us who organise it. However, by walking slowly through the process, all students have what they describe as a ‘life changing’ experience and the product owners gain courage, hope and new skills which enable them, for the most part, to create sustainable livelihoods. I say for the most part as the people we work with every day are the poorest of the poor. Many earn the equivalent 23p per day, and now the price of a kilo of rice has risen to 39p. Consequently the staple diet of the Filipino is oftentimes beyond the means of the majority of the people. When I first arrived in the Philippines it became very apparent that the Filipino lives from day to day, oftentimes unable to plan for the following week or save any money for emergencies. Consequently, even if a person manages to earn

300 pesos (\$5) a day, and one of their children become sick, which is often the case, all their money will be used for medicine and hospital fees and the opportunity to earn on the next day is gone.

Subsequently, livelihood developed in isolation is not sustainable, it is important to pay attention to basic services, education and capacity building at the same time. At times I do not feel like a good development worker and often I am the apprentice learning literally on the job. I feel the pressure a lot as many people's hopes are upon us and the work that we are doing. But the joy, the great joy, is

seeing the poor especially the women gradually learn to stand up in confidence and courage to become their own agents of change.

When the day comes that I am called to leave the Philippines and return home it will be a sad day indeed for me. The warm, loving people who have stirred within me again the missionary spirit have made this place my home and has, I feel, revealed to me the real meaning of *"Make your home in me as I have made mine in you"*