

2007: The Philippines, A Short Term as Peace Corps Acting Country Director

Over 9,000 Volunteers have served in the Philippines since 1961. The country consists of 7,000 islands of which only 2,000 are inhabited and only 500 of those are larger than half a square mile. The population of the Philippines was approximately 90 million with a growth rate of 2.4% (~110 million today).

The Philippines were ruled by a Spanish colonial administration from 1565–1898 and were then annexed by the United States after it won the Spanish-American War of 1898 (along with Guam and Puerto Rico). American control continued until 1946, with an interim independent government established beginning in 1935. Japan occupied the country, however, from 1942 to 1945. The United States government applied a similar campaign to the indigenous people of the mountain regions of Luzon (the northernmost island group) as it had used against Native Americans: a “benevolent assimilation” doctrine, with the goal of Americanizing them. The U.S. instituted an educational curriculum that largely ignored local history and focused instead on nationalistic narratives.

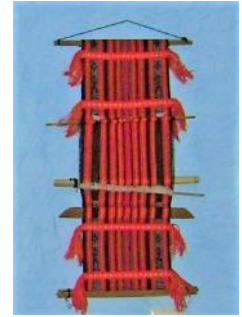


As a result, in the Ifugao region country music was popular, the older generation spoke fluent English but not the national language, and cowboy boots and hats were part of the mainstream dress! Much traditional knowledge had been lost.



I visited this region, which is famous for its rice terraces as well as weaving and wood carving. Unfortunately, my photos from this trip are lost so I can only share “stock” images. Although I was told the rice terraces date back 2000 years, archeologists now believe they are much more recent than that. However, they are dramatic in this mountainous region of Banaue, at 4900’ elevation. They are irrigated from the rain forests at higher altitude.

Weaving centers have been established to make sure the craft is not lost and the small back-strap loom I bought would be used to create, for example, a loin cloth. Here are photos of the traditional weaving and weavers.



Here are traditional dancers and an Ifugao woman who looks like a woman I remember photographing.



A "rice god" protects the terrain, and a "rice god" carving I bought.



Here is a wall décor of spoons and forks and I couldn't find any examples of this on line. I assume I also bought it in the Ifugao region, and I know the symbolism is good health and family strength. Filipinos often have a large intricately carved wooden fork



and spoon hanging on their dining area wall for this symbolism.

I also bought a carved mask for which I have no idea of its region or meaning!



While on that trip north I stopped at the Ferdinand E. Marcos Presidential Center, a museum situated in Batac, Ilocos Norte, dedicated to the former Philippine President which also hosts his cenotaph. The museum shows memorabilia of the late president, from his stint in the armed forces to his presidency. The large cenotaph contained the glass-encased coffin in which the widely-believed embalmed body of Marcos was on public display shortly after his remains were brought from the United States in 1993, until his body was re-interred at the Libingan ng mga Bayani National Cemetery in Metro Manila on November 18, 2016. A wax replica of Marcos remains displayed inside the glass coffin.



The country is very diverse, as one would expect from a 1000-mile-long archipelago. The Dominican Missionary Remesal wrote the following of Manila in 1629: "The diversity here is immense such that I could go on forever trying to differentiate lands and peoples. There are Castilians from all provinces. There are Portuguese and Italians; Dutch, Greeks and Canary Islanders, and Mexican Indians. There are slaves from Africa brought by the Spaniards [Through America], and others brought by the Portuguese [Through India]. There is an African Moor with his turban here. There are Javanese from Java, Japanese and Bengalese from Bengal. Among all these people are the Chinese whose numbers here are untold and who outnumber everyone else. From China there are peoples so different from each other, and from provinces as distant, as Italy is from Spain. Finally, of the *mestizos*, the mixed-race people here, I cannot even write because in Manila there is no limit to combinations of peoples with peoples. This is in the city where all the buzz is." (Remesal, 1629: 680–1)

The truly global trading network of the 1600's was anchored by Madrid, Mexico and Manila with goods traversing both oceans. This was also the period of Spanish missionaries converting the Filipinos to Christianity. Today some regions are primarily Muslim, and the country is majority Catholic, although all religions are represented. Much of the art and architecture are reminiscent of styles from Spain, although in many cases re-built after the virtual total destruction of WWII.



The San Agustin Church was the only building left intact after the destruction of Intramuros in WWII. Built between 1587 and 1606, it is the oldest church in the Philippines. The massive facade conceals an ornate interior. Note the intricate trompe l'oeil frescoes on the vaulted ceiling. The present structure is actually the third to stand on the site and has weathered seven major earthquakes, as well as the Battle of Manila. Photo by Christopher Kober.

Although most surnames are Spanish, more than 85 native languages and dialects are spoken in the Philippines. Tagalog and English are the official languages and are taught in the schools and about half the population spoke English at that time. There was general concern that English language instruction was deteriorating in the schools.

Peace Corps had a sizable program of 135 volunteers primarily doing team teaching with English teachers (ED), working with youth in disadvantaged urban situations (YD), and in coastal resource management (CRM). Many cultural elements felt familiar from Micronesia, the food was more Asian, and rice grew absolutely everywhere. An unfortunate legacy of a half century of military bases was that sex work remained a very large industry. The Philippines graduates tens of thousands of doctors and nurses every year who are providing skilled medical care throughout the world.

In mid-1990, PC/Philippines had suspended the program due to security concerns over armed insurgents. The program resumed in 1992. However, in early 2003, Peace Corps withdrew from the southern island of Mindanao due to the activity of Muslim nationalist insurgent groups. Volunteers continued to support that region by holding training programs on a nearby island which teachers from Mindanao attended.

Obviously, PC Philippines is a complicated post with its widely dispersed territory and multiple languages – national, regional and local. During my time there the staff was engaged in a process to simplify the programming and provide more focused training for the volunteers. They had a four-region structure (as we had in Micronesia) where a staff person supported the PCVs in local matters of their housing, host families, health, safety and security (with, of course, the backing of the health and safety and security professional staff in Manila). The programming staff could focus on establishing good local work sites for the PCVs. With each of the partner government ministries we had a Program of Engagement which were in the process of re-negotiation. The Philippines also had an agency that was responsible for authorizing and approving the locations and work plans of every volunteer coming into the country, no matter what the sponsoring organization. They, too, were in the process of updating their goals and were prioritizing provinces where they saw the need for various types of volunteer assistance. Since all of these processes involved input from multiple stakeholders it was time consuming, but hopefully would result in a better use of scarce (human) resources. The Ministry of Education had developed a template for the agreed-upon responsibilities of any school to which a PCV would be assigned as well as a “contract” of the volunteer’s expected work program. And, of course the regional support staff were able to contribute their local knowledge to these placement decisions. All of which involved a lot of collaborative teamwork.

PC Philippines was also transitioning their 10-week Pre-Service Training (PST) to a community-based model (as opposed to a central training facility) which provides stronger focus on community entry, cultural integration and regional language skills but which involved another new set of tasks for staff to organize suitable sites for such trainings, recruit and train host families and recruit and train language and cultural facilitator/trainers. This is the team in March 2007.



Other initiatives were also underway including establishing a VAC where PCVs select representatives to interface on a regular basis with the CD and other staff in order to improve the quality of the volunteers' service experience. Fortunately, there had been a great deal of input on all of these subjects from a recent internal management assessment, PCV exit surveys and discussion at the Close of Service Conference held at Las Brisas Resort for those who would be completing service in May.

With these structural revisions we were reviewing staff members' skill sets and preferences to improve the match for each position. Another initiative was to create a documentary film of the impact PCVs had had in their 45 years of service to the people of the Philippines. This involved finding and interviewing past beneficiaries from as many geographies and program sectors as possible, having them agree to participate, and contracting with film production specialists.

I was serving as CD on an interim basis because the CD was returning to the U.S. for medical treatment. If his health would not permit him to resume his duties, I would remain as the CD. He and HQ staff made it clear I was to fully function as CD during the interim period, make decisions (with of course PC/HQ concurrence where required) and move all initiatives forward. Fortunately, his health improved and after two very intense months I was able to return to DC. We celebrated his birthday just before his departure to the U.S.



In 2019 Manila was ranked the most densely populated city in the world and the second-most disaster-prone after Tokyo. The density dwarfs that of Kolkata, Mumbai, Dhaka and Tokyo. The population was 1.8 million in 2015. The National Capital Region (NCR) is comprised of 16 independent cities (Manila is one of them) and its population in 2015 totaled about 13 million persons. There are several sectors each of which would qualify as Central Business Districts. This photo from the bay shows Manila, where the U.S. Embassy was located, looking north from approximately where the Senate of the Philippines, the Peace Corps and other offices, are located. Photo courtesy of Mike Gonzalez, 2009.



The national government had spread the offices of various ministries throughout the NCR to distribute the employment base. Traffic moved at a snail pace. As described above, we were in the process of adjusting programming with our various sponsoring agencies, so I had to often attend meetings at their offices. A meeting at one of those offices required virtually an entire day due to the traffic density. The one good thing about that was that due to the 12-hour time difference from Washington, DC I could continue to work on my Crisis Corps job while stuck in traffic!

In addition to private taxis, buses and rickshaws, a primary form of transport throughout the cities of The Philippines is the Jeepney. These function on fixed routes with fixed fares. Although many were still actual body extensions to WWII military jeeps, more recently they were purpose-built, known as second or third generation. What they all had in common, however, was the flamboyant decoration created by each owner.



During this period, PC/HQ had developed a uniform template for the work of program sectors in each country, called a framework. We were fortunate to have education program specialist Peggy Seufert spend ten days. With her guidance, all three sector managers streamlined the frameworks for their sectors, with clear purpose statements, goals and objectives. These would serve as the basis for training during the upcoming PST, and for creation of new Volunteer Assignment Descriptions when recruiting the next group of volunteers. These also serve as the basis for development of new Project Plans working with Project Advisory Councils comprised of stakeholders for each program sector.

During her visit we had the opportunity to visit the Batangas region southwest of Manila where we saw the aquaculture of Lake Taal in the crater of Taal volcano. Here is Peggy with a view of the lake, a view of the tilapia fish cage farming, and the traditional fishing boats.



When preparing this writeup I was saddened to read of the Taal eruption that occurred on January 12, 2020, the ash from which must have devastated the fish pen aquaculture. As much as a meter or more of ashfall on land was reported in the areas close to Volcano Island in the middle of the lake and reached as far as Manila 45 km away. The plume was reported as 9 miles in height. Since no “fish kills” were reported in the deep parts of the lake, it is believed that the fish present in the cages during the eruption could have swum out into the open water with the sinking of the cages. The tilapia caught in the lake about two weeks after the eruption was found to be safe for human consumption by the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources. However, the economic impact of re-establishing the aquaculture would have been significant. (Photos courtesy of CNN and Reuters.)



In addition to aquaculture, silk farming was being encouraged by the Philippine government and Batangas was one of the targeted regions. In order to raise silk-worms you have to have enough land to support a lot of mulberry trees because the worms have voracious appetites. Visiting a friend’s family operation, it was fascinating to see the entire process, from eggs to caterpillars to cocoons to unwinding the silk thread from the cocoon to spinning it in preparation for weaving. Many of the sericulture farmers only go so far as to produce the cocoons which they sell into processing facilities.



These photos are from Vision Fund

which made small loans to sericulture farmers.



The traditional men’s shirts known as Barongs were usually made from pineapple or abaca (a form of banana) fibers, another traditional textile industry. Although occasionally they, too, were made of silk.

Although I didn't travel beyond the northernmost island group of Luzon, I saw many volcanoes and the aftermath of their recent eruptions, which, coupled with frequent typhoons, created a large cadre of Internally Displaced Persons in many regions of the country. As part of my Crisis Corps job in DC I worked to bring CCV's to the Philippines and shortly after my departure the first two CC Volunteers, an urban nutritionist and an agricultural extension worker arrived. Over the following years this group (by then called Peace Corps Response) grew with requests from multiple hosting agencies.

During July and August, 2006, the 2462-meter-high Mt Mayan volcano erupted displacing 50,000 people from its 8-kilometer danger zone. It is located in the Bicol region southeast of Manila on Luzon. Huge quantities of loose ash were disbursed throughout the area. Then, on November 30, category 4 (5 is the highest/most destructive) typhoon Durian pounded the region with heavy rains creating mudslides on the southern and western slopes of the volcano and killing over 1000 people. More than 1.1 million people were affected and over 20,000 were in 72 local evacuation centers.



Late in January I visited one of the large displaced persons housing complexes and saw the assistance provided by many countries. This community by then had established small local shops as would be found in a typical Filipino village as well as schools for the children.





We were visiting at the time of dedication of the first permanent housing.



Nearby, one of our volunteers was working on a project to create inexpensive sand filters to provide safe drinking water. Another was involved in livelihood training.



One aspect of the Philippines that I will always remember is that everywhere – from Manila to tiny villages in the mountains, people loved to sing, Karaoke was all the rage, and the music

most often heard were the American love songs of the 30's, 40's and 50's! Filipino inventor Roberto del Rosario holds the machine's patent. He developed the Karaoke Sing-Along System in 1975. Since then, singing has become a central part of pop culture in the Philippines. For the most part, though, karaoke is a family-friendly activity throughout the Philippines.

My first exposure to Peace Corps Philippines had been in 2004 when I was newly sworn in as CD for Micronesia (the countries of Palau and Federated States of Micronesia). We decided to route me through Manila so that I could present my credentials to the U.S. Ambassador to the Philippines and Palau, be briefed, as well as welcomed and entertained (with a traditional



merenda – extensive potluck, stock photo) by the PC country staff. The CD, having previously served as CD in Kiribati, shared his experiences with Pacific island programs, I sat in on exit interviews with PCV's completing their service, and learned a great deal in a whirlwind 24-hour visit.

Each U.S. Embassy (USE) conducts a periodic meeting (frequency depending on the activity level in the country) of all the department representatives of the Embassy as well as any other U.S. agencies that might be active in the country such as Agriculture, Defense, Intelligence, etc. Attending my first Country Team meeting was more than overwhelming as there were about 40 people in the room (the USE in Manila had 1600 employees) all using abbreviations/jargon of which I could understand very little. I would not face such a crowd again until my return in 2007 as acting CD.

Here is a photo from the fun going-away party the staff held for me in 2007 and gifts that included a very strong locally-woven carryall, a necklace, as well as several others.



I returned home with renewed memories of the hospitality of PC/Philippines, and also of the high quality of service being performed by the volunteer community and the staff who supported them.

Fast forward another three years, 2010, when PC/HQ was asking selected countries to anticipate up to a doubling of their volunteer intake groups. I had been retired for a year and was contracted as a consultant to assist the staff in developing the response to that demand. The irony was that during the time I was there in August, they were in the process finalizing pre-service training for their largest group of trainees ever because they had combined all sectors into one input, so 145 versus a typical 70! The deliverables from the assignment ranged from impacts on the recruitment process/timing at HQ, through all the processes of onboarding volunteers, including a revised pre-service training design and recommendations for the activities of the full two-year service period of a

volunteer. During the month of preparation before the two weeks in-country I received invaluable assistance from PC staff in many countries who had experience with island/multiple language programs as well as large trainee inputs, which was targeted at 195 for The Philippines. I was happy to see that many of the recommendations from that project were incorporated into PC/Philippine's three-year plan.

That consulting assignment was my final official work for Peace Corps. However, there were still two more assignments before retirement. Next you will be reading about Moldova.