

Asia Through The Eyes Of A Teen

By Brant Doner

This past summer a coalition of charities including Children's Hunger Relief Fund journeyed to various countries in Asia in order to verify and inspect funded projects as well as possible future projects. The main theme throughout non-profit work in Asia is battling the massive sex slavery issue, which is estimated by the United Nations to have four million children and women involved. My journal is a day-by-day account of the projects, countries and people which we met along the way of trying to help with one of the world's most heart-breaking tragedies.

Day 1

Travel Day- The first day of the trip! A long flight From San Francisco to Hong Kong.

Day 2

Yet another flight this time from Hong Kong to Manila.

Upon arriving at the city of Manila, I was shocked to discover a city, not tarnished by death or dirt, but a relatively clean and busy metropolis, seemingly a normal large capital city. The people appear to be incredible, hard-working, diligent and wherever you go extremely polite.

My former experiences of "growing" third world countries led me to expect something totally different from what I discovered in Manila. This country truly felt as though it was "going somewhere" and growing rapidly. The people appeared to be optimistic, hopeful and responsible — all character qualities that form great ingredients for dedicated, trustworthy volunteers and managers of possible projects.

After days of traveling we reached the hotel and met for the first time as a team at dinner. The team, made up of individuals from around the world, discussed our objectives and plans for the next few days in the Philippines. Colonel Doner (Dad) directed the meeting and discussed each individual's role as a member of the team. Wally McCall, Monte Wilson, Davide Zaccarillo, Ken McGrath myself and a

few others were all eager to begin our mission together to find promising and dedicated projects in the Philippines as well as all over Asia.

Day 3 - Baseco and Krus Na Ligas

Today we set out for the first project visit; no amount of briefing could have prepared me for the life style and circumstances that we found at "Baseco". We were transported to this community via a small motor operated boat made of rotted wood, which under "normal" circumstances I would never have set foot in, and in place of a clean sea we traveled on a dirty, dark and trash infested ocean. Despite the conditions of the water however many children could be seen swimming and fishing.

After we disembarked from the boat we faced a crowded community built on and around a garbage dump. Eighty thousand people have moved and built their homes in this area! By this community's standards a "home" or "house" consists of five to twenty metal sheets positioned to form walls and a roof; the interior of the house is dirt and mud. The stench is nearly unbearable and many times the size of the family can be as large as twelve, in which case "comfort" space is a joke at best. Most of the people have to relocate their "houses" annually during the typhoon season, around July through December. Despite their houses' certain destruction the families will always build a new house closer to the beach after having to retreat and live in the swamps in closer vicinity to the dumps.

This community brought a whole new meaning to my view of "crowded", "dirty" and "poverty". Hundreds of children ran around naked, scavenging the new dump sites for recyclable materials. The streets were COVERED in garbage and animal waste, any meat or fresh fish was immediately covered by bugs.

While walking around Baseco's "beach" district the team stopped and had a short interview with a grandmother named Joane Benopare. She had been living in the community for

thirteen years and was committed to staying there at “home”. Her five children were all fisherman, looking for fish or mussels.

At this community the main occupation was fishing and also “carpentry”, (don’t fool yourself however, looking around at the houses and their material it was clear that a carpenter was essentially a qualified wood scavenger).

Joane said that when her children were younger they started to scavenge the dumps and ocean at five years old; they have known nothing else their whole life. A typical family’s daily income is equivalent to one US dollar. That is not one person’s income but a collaboration of an entire household, six to ten people living in one tiny shack. Because of rising prices (all related to world wide rising gasoline prices) the community’s main meal, rice, has doubled in price and forced families to eat in less quantity and a lower quality.



The local children scavenging the fresh dump in Baseco.

As far as education goes “Hope World Wide” has a pre-school on the outskirts of the town. The Philippine government has also built and funds a large elementary school in the area. Tuition is free; all that is required is a fifteen dollar uniform which most families cannot afford to buy for their children. There are around two-thousand students at the school and this elementary teaching will most likely be the extent of their education.

While visiting the schools, Colonel Doner decided to make a large donation to the pur-

chase of school uniforms for children. Not only are they cheap (as cited above, a measly fifteen dollars) but also the family or individual child may repeat use of them for around three years. So, all things worked out, it takes five dollars to send a child to school in the Philippines for an entire year! If you are interested in donating to this particular project please check the CHRF website for further details.

One of the most horrifying epidemics in Baseco, the Philippines and all of Asia is the sex slavery, child labor and massive sexual abuse problem. While the team evaluated the pre-school, I talked to their ONLY therapist, a dedicated worker named Grace.

Grace works with around twenty sexually abused children at a time and constantly intervenes with local families. The abused children develop a closed up personality and typically are very violent with their peers. Most of the time their parents, possibly the offenders, have had the same issues. Grace will talk with the children on a weekly basis and if no recovery is formulating, she recommends the child to a doctor or rehabilitation center outside of Baseco.

Krus Na Ligas

That afternoon the team traveled to another school and orphanage in Manila where local “Hope” volunteers were performing a puppet show. The thesis of the show, playfully and comprehensibly presented, portrayed to the children that; contrary to many of their own lifestyles, sexual abuse and rape were not normal or by any means acceptable.

Immediately following the presentation therapists dispersed the children into groups and initiated conversations about the puppet show. When talking to one of the lead therapists, she shared with me that most children

never forget these incidents and how it is so important for them to have opportunities to talk about the trauma in order to process what occurred. Many of these children have been abused on a mild or severe level; in any case the volunteers are there to show the children that they needn't feel they deserve the abuse they receive.



Members of the CHRF team watching the puppet show with the children at Krus Na Ligas.

is most of the kid's first encounter with school and Laguna places them in the appropriate grade level. After one or two years at the center, children experience a visible and healthy change in their communication and interaction with others. The 50 or so children staying at Laguna range from four to seventeen years old. The project is quite young and has graduated a few hundred children, so far however the metamorphosis in each child's life has been dramatic and phenomenal.

Upon our first meeting with many of the kids, they were very shy and tentative, after just a few minutes however they were approaching us and engaging in friendly conversation. They showed us their shared rooms and were very proud to exemplify how clean everything appeared. When it was time to depart the children gathered around and put on a dance. Several of the children spoke to the team as a whole thanking us for visiting them and for the support that CHRF is able

to provide.

Day 4 - Laguna & Tuloy

After a night of processing the dramatic encounters experienced by seeing the poverty and circumstances of the children, the team set out for another day of project visits. This time we traveled an hour outside of central Manila to evaluate a "Rehabilitation" center and school in a small town named Laguna. Beyond being a simple rehab center for the sexually abused children of the city, the Laguna Hope Center provides their children education, counseling, friendly interaction with other kids, a safe environment to live at for as long as two years and an opportunity to develop their own responsibility as maturing adults.

Brian, the manager and leading therapist at the Hope Center, showed us around the project and explained the fundamentals of Hope's mission. It



The amazing children of Laguna! Monte Wilson, long time CHRF board member in top center and me sitting in front.

Below is the heartbreaking story of Mimi, a beautiful young Laguna girl.

“Priceless...”

When she was still a month old, a Philippine family adopted Mimi. After 11 years she discovered her true identity and started to get bitter and rebel against her parents for hiding the truth from her. Later on she disclosed that she was sexually molested by some of her friends' parents. She stayed in a shelter for girls and lived there for almost three years. She rarely was able to visit her adoption family due to her frequent disregard to the Laguna institution rules. Occasionally she would hurt herself. In January of 2005 she arrived at the Center of HOPE not knowing what would happen between her and her family. She joined the “Groupwork” for teens and also Individual Therapy. Changes in her character started to take place and was re-enforced by the support of caring adults and peers around her. Regular visits with her adoptive family helped her to be secured and realized that her value is worth more than any peso this world can offer. In October of 2005 Mimi was returned to her loving family.

The Hope Center at Laguna has been able to organize and create something unique and incredibly special. Not only are the kids surrounded by workers and volunteers who are there to help and talk with them, they are also amid close friends who have suffered the same traumatic experiences. The children (who at one time seemed worthless to themselves) are now confident individuals ready to embrace the world in a fresh way, with a responsible and positive attitude supported by hope.

Tuloy

Next the team visited a project located in central Manila, its name, Tuloy, means welcome it Filipino. Father Rocky Evangelista started this impressive and successful project fourteen years ago. These past few years however the project has transcended from a small orphanage to a 4.5-acre campus. Two hundred former street children, now students, call Tuloy “home” and another four-hundred students at-

tend Tuloy but do not occupy residence there.

The campus provides the children with priceless training that they may build on and continue upon their departure from Tuloy. Once the young adults are back in the city and there hopefully start a career, which they are specialized in. The children are nine to eighteen years old and may attend elementary and high school type courses. Once they know what they wish to do as far as a career they are encouraged to enter into one of the campus's specialized vocational trainings etc... Tuloy provides opportunities with automotive, electric, air conditioning, baking and computer technology training.

What is so special about Tuloy?

Father Rocky has implemented some very powerful and responsible distinctions within his campus. Upon their immediate arrival from the city slums a child is free to stay and look at the classes they might be attending or choose to flee from Tuloy (after a life defined by abuse and self-protection the children aren't quick to trust even the people who intend to help them). The children often run away; they steal the clothes, shoes and blankets with which they were provided. However, if a child should choose to return, even after running away and stealing, they are treated with the same hospitality. Even if they again flee and steal they are welcomed again with open arms. Around the third or fourth time the child realizes that these people whom he or she is stealing from have no other intention but to provide for them. After this experience trust is built and the child more often than not chooses to stay and grow up at Tuloy. After they graduate from the program they are motivated with a new attitude of honesty, diligence and ability to perform excellence. Indeed, the Tuloy graduates are known throughout their respective communities not only as successful leaders but also as compassionate people.

Day 5 - Naga City with Mother Joan

I never had the fortune of meeting Mother Teresa, I am assured that she was a wonderful lady dedicated to loving others, every one

looked up to her and admired her. But reading about someone can only go so far, meeting them is an entirely different experience. After we left Manila early to go to Naga City I had the honor of meeting Mother Joan Clare, a Mother Superior who has dedicated her entire life to providing for others. After establishing an extremely successful orphanage in Jamaica she was relocated to the Philippines where she is now providing another 60 orphans with a home and an education.

Upon my arrival to Naga City a sharp pain in my kidney which had been building up for days finally paralyzed me. Immediately Mother Joan drove me to the nearest hospital where they were able to perform the proper tests and prescribe medication. Her patience, care and love to me, a stranger, was overwhelming and perfectly revealed why she is referred to as the “Mother Teresa” of the Philippines. The people in the camps, garbage dumps, towns and schools bowed with respect and admiration for her, and her response was to bow lower in respect for them.

Unfortunately due to the hospital visit I was not able to attend the feeding project at the local garbage dumps. There the team, led by Colonel Doner, provided hungry children and families with rice and simple supplies, a life-saving tradition started by Mother Joan and her nuns. The people normally gather at the dumps to scavenge and even eat

what they find, now however they may plant the vegetable seeds provided to them by CHRF and start a healthy diet. Since the feeding program had been cut back to half its former size due to rising food costs, CHRF volunteered to re-instate the program to its former consistency.



Mother Joan with one of the children

Next the team visited the orphanage established and managed by the nuns. Sixty young children were there being provided with food, shelter and education. Many of the children were abandoned by their anonymous families and found by townspeople in dumps or sewers. Their conditions upon arrival are horrific: beaten, starving and moments from death they are brought to the orphanage where years later they are prepared to leave healthy, ready, responsible and alive!



Above Colonel Doner providing the hungry children of Naga City with food.

Days 6-8

These days were spent in an irate feeling of confusion and “disaster” as our planes were delayed or cancelled and left us abandoned. Thankfully we were able to re-arrange any project visitations and successfully landed in Phnom Penh, Cambodia on the night of the 27th.

Day 9 - Hagar

One of Cambodia’s leading non-profit organizations has developed a program that redefines the meaning of competency and

excellence in providing for the victims of sex abuse. The Hagar project is spread throughout Phnom Penh and provides their children and inhabitants with opportunities to work and receive an education. Through intensive dedication provided by the Hagar staff (including a psycho-social rehabilitation team comprised of a dozen trained members), the children are able to decide who they want to be with a fresh mindset. Whether that process includes teaching them how to cook or providing them with facial reconstructive surgery (after being beaten beyond recognition by their family, sexual captor, or rival) Hagar is committed to bestow these people with the very best.

During the morning the team visited the Women's Recovery Center. A place for women who have just escaped or been rescued from the sex slavery market. The Center includes a coffee shop on the main street where the woman can gain work experience and training. If you saw the NBC "Dateline" special on sex trafficking in Asia you will be familiar with this project and the women there. Dateline interviewed several of the victims at the Hagar Center.

Unfortunately some of those forced into prostitution are trapped into the mindset that they must continue in what they are doing. For them there is too much shame to start over and have their families realize where their paycheck comes from. Often the girls leave the Hagar center after a few days if they have been "rescued" and assigned there. The sex captors have implanted powerful fears into all of the women's thinking. Although things appear normal when driving through the city within Cambodia, abuse and violence is culturally acceptable as long as you maintain face outside your home. Violence is hidden behind the walls.

One of Hagar's rigorously taught fundamentals is forgiveness, the ability to forgive yourself for what you were forced into and the shame that comes along with it. Since often the parents are fooled by the captors into believing that they are sending their daughter (or son) to a promising job the ability to forgive your family is also hard to embrace, yet valuable and important to the victim's future.

After the women are provided with six months of education they are free to choose from a variety of jobs provided for them by Hagar. Their fear of the outside will slowly be diminished as their anger and depression created from the post-traumatic stress will hopefully dissipate over time.

Hagar provides the Phnom Penh community with much more than a Woman's Recovery Center, they additionally supply 100 abused children with an aftercare program, another 100 children belong at the Hagar Foster home and 70 other children stay at the "House of Smiles" (a combination of care center, orphanage and school), and finally there are also over 200 students in their education program. Also, besides providing a café and restaurant for the kids to work at upon completion of their graduation, Hagar has also established a successful catering service and a large soy factory where the graduates may be employed.

After viewing the multiple aspects, goals and dynamics of Hagar's projects the CHRF team agreed that this project has managed to produce "real change". The change went beyond any normal, shallow or facial level and transcended a deep change within all of the people that are cared for by a Hagar project. Hagar has established a unique project combining business and support centers to ultimately produce the best results possible for all of their people.

Day 10 - Chab Dai

On the day of the 29th the CHRF team met with the leaders of the "Chab Dai Coalition" for extensive meetings. The coalition is made up of over 40 different organizations within Cambodia working with victims at risk of being sexually abused and exploited. By operating with so many organizations Chab Dai is a very agile, dynamic and active operation. When an issue appears in Cambodia, Chab Dai may work with and use any of the 40 organizations that are specialized with the victim's problem, issue or epidemic. The Coalition focuses on prevention, intervention, rehabilitation and education. Chab Dai provides the community with much needed resources such as a library, education on identifying strategies

the sex captors employ in order to trick the parents into obtaining their children, “advice clinics” for prevention and rehabilitation as well as many, many other opportunities and activities for the Cambodian community.

Another program started by Chab Dai is the “Doorsteps” program, committed to combating child sexual exploitation. The idea and philosophy of the Doorsteps program is to distribute emergency grants for victims in emergencies. The program often funds one of the 40 members of the Chab Dai coalition to act in accordance with their philosophy of increasing the strength and quality of sexual prevention and intervention programs. The leaders behind the Coalition are determined, diligent and intelligent individuals; who, by their mere presence, guarantee a promising hope for the future of Cambodia.

Day 11 - Travel Day

Today was spent relocating our team from Cambodia to our last stop, Bangkok Thailand.

Day 12 - World Concern

Bangkok, Thailand. A wonderful place to see, perhaps not so wonderful to live in, at least when the United Nations reports that there could be an estimated 4,000,000 children abducted into the sex slavery market across Asia, with Bangkok acting as the sex capital. This time the team met with a large organization, “World Concern”, which works across the country of Thailand promoting “safety”, safe communities, safe migration and safe havens for children who have been abused. World Concern doesn’t just fight the battle in Thailand, they also support prevention efforts in Cambodia, India and Nepal. In India World Concern works with organizations to provide meals, education and a safe place for immigrating children. There is also HIV prevention training since the statistics for the virus are rapidly rising in that area of the world. In Nepal WC works with 1,000 victims of sexual exploitation, helping them on their path to restoration. Overall World Concern helps around 12,000 children recover from the sex market,

all on a very small budget. They are also establishing “Seventh Heavens” a six year program similar to an orphanage in which the victim of abuse may recover and regain their confidence in life.

As opposed to spreading their resources out thin, “World Concern” often supports other organizations that operate under the same set of goals. They are one of the leading members of “Carnit”, another coalition with around 65 groups. Much like the Chab Dai coalition of Cambodia these projects have learned the value of operating together and using each other’s strengths.

Summary

To say that this trip “changed” my life would be an understatement and doesn’t come close to explaining the impact it has left with me. Rather, these couple of weeks spent reviewing and reporting about the children, their stories, their conditions, etc.... have partially formed who I am. After meeting so many different type’s of people, poverty stricken, sick, abused, molested and orphaned children the impression left with me is hard to describe in words. Inspiration mixed with desperation, authentic joy with dark despair, dignified pride with selfless humility are all some of the contrasting elements brought about by the trip. After going to these places and living with these people there is a feeling gained, a hidden treasure discovered that is far too special to re-create with words. It is not a feeling that can be experienced when reading about, nor listening to, or watching; the feeling or experience gained is no sort of material possession. The treasure, hidden out in the countries of Asia, is enough to keep many people like Mother Joan alive, to provide all the people with hope. The treasure, in fact, is the hope, the smiles, the miraculous attitudes born out of the children, the people, the families and the workers. The treasure is a priceless and beautiful faith that through themselves and with the help from other concerned people like our donors, all things are truly possible for these wonderful children.
