

Molly Stewart

Please find below my report on my recent trip to the Philippines for which I received funding from GIFT. Please note that my previous address (72b claxton grove, London, w6 8he) has now changed and I can now be reached at **17 Dorset Street, Lincoln, LN2 5NS** or at stewart.molly91@gmail.com

I am currently based in Lincoln so will attempt to contact the rotary club here.

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7 Weeks in Tacloban, Philippines with Volunteer for the Visayans

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Our homestay family. Clockwise from left to right; Nany Soli, Jhenerz, Arlene, Baby Sophinia, Lloyd, TzuChai, Me, Jaylito

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Tacloban city is the regional centre of the Eastern Visayans and was the area worst affected by Typhoon Yolanda in 2014. Typhoon Yolanda was a category 5 typhoon and one of the strongest typhoons recorded. Although the city is on its way to recovery reminders of this tragedy are frequent in every day life and many families are living in poverty in its wake.

I received funding from GIFT friendship trust to undertake my medical elective in Tacloban, Philippines at the end of my medical degree and travelled with another medical student, Lloyd. We arranged our elective through a charity called Volunteer for the Visayans (VFV) who undertake a large number of essential projects in and around Tacloban city. The organisation sponsors over 150 children in the area and arranges medical projects, health checks for sponsored children, sponsorship to keep children in school and prevent them working in dumpsites and a number of leisure activities with the children to engage them and reduce crime in the area. I spent 7 weeks in Tacloban splitting my time between Leyte Provincial Hospital and Tabon-Tabon rural health unit whilst also carrying out annual health checks on the sponsored children. Working with these children was fantastic. Whilst carrying out health checks I got to understand how truly resilient these children are, many having lost parents in Typhoon Yolanda and taking on parental responsibility for their siblings at remarkably young ages. This was a true inspiration. One of the best parts of my trip was seeing the children outside of the health checks in the local community. We could barely walk 10 feet without hearing 'hello', 'what's your name?' or 'come and play basketball!'. We had a fantastic time with the children who all inevitably beat us at basketball, the most popular sport in the Philippines and played by almost every boy, regardless of their age.



Left to right; with some of the local children, outside Leyte Provincial Hospital, meeting some of the sponsored children, at the annual health check.

When I first arrived in Tacloban I was apprehensive about the following weeks having never stayed in a homestay before. I was collected by a VFV volunteer who took me to my homestay and introduced me to my homestay family. I was immediately relieved of my reservations as I was welcomed in to open arms by the Gapate family. We lived in a 2 bedroom house with our Nanay (mother), her 2 sons Jhenerz and Jaylito, her daughter in law Arlene, her 2 granddaughters TzuChai (right) and Sophinia and her grandson Kenneth in Barangay, or community, 64. We were shown to our room which was basic, with a bucket for showering and flushing the toilet and no running water, but spacious and comfortable. This was initially quite a culture shock however we quickly grew used to life without the home comforts we are used to and this really made me reflect on exactly what we actually need to make us happy. During dinner we immediately felt like part of the family with TzuChai immediately referring to us as Ate and Kuya, terms used in the Philippines to mean big sister and brother respectively and also used to denote respect to elders or more senior people in the workplace.



On our first evening we quickly learnt about local customs and cultures. TzuChai pointed out our big noses, a comment not considered rude but merely an observation of our appearance which is a common way to greet a friend in the Philippines – we were warned not to take offence if someone called us fat! Lloyd, understandably, then proceeded to 'take' TzuChai's nose which offended her greatly and resulted in her proclaiming 'bad!' repeatedly. We learnt that this is a crude symbol in the Philippines and so we were rightly told off by TzuChai. We went to bed under our mosquito nets full of delicious chicken adobo and rice however we were shocked to learn that while we were sleeping, 71 year old Nanay would be performing her usual routine of waking at 0430 to fetch food from the market for the following days meals!

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Over the coming days and nights we learnt a huge amount about the lives of the Gapate family. They openly spoke about the devastation of Typhoon Yolanda and the aftermath. Their stories ranged from the sentimental things that had been destroyed in their home, to swimming past deceased friends and neighbours to escape and the 6 month long power cut that followed. Everything was said with a smile and without any hint of self-pity. This was mirrored in anyone we spoke to about the typhoon and is a true testament to the Filipino culture. They are a people who do not dwell on what has happened but instead rebuild their lives and embrace their future in a truly admirable way.

During our stay we were invited to attend the christening of Sophinia. On the day of the christening we were invited to celebrate with the family after the church service as unfortunately we had commitments with VFV during the ceremony. When we arrived back to the house we were introduced to the extended family who were just as welcoming as our homestay. Jaylito and Jhenerz took us to the basketball plaza, a meeting place for all in the community. We grilled fresh fish and drank Tuba, coconut wine which is made locally and sold by the gallon, with the family but also the entire Barangay who had come to celebrate. That evening there was a party in the plaza which was remarkable. High tech sound systems were wheeled out and the Filipino love of karaoke was truly embraced! Given that the local elections were coming up candidates did their speeches and performed traditional dances for luck whilst the locals looked on and cheered for all candidates, regardless of their personal preference. The sense of community was immense with families frequently sharing anything they had with others. Post is not sent to a house number but instead to individual Nanay's and if ever the post master wasn't sure which house to go to anyone in the Barangay was immediately able to point him in the correct direction. The christening was a fantastic experience as it allowed us to get to know the wider community better and from them on most people we passed always greeted us by name, a far cry from the streets of London!



We learnt a lot about the public's opinion on both nationwide and local politics during our homestay. The current president is Rodrigo Duterte and opinion regarding his policies are widely split. The family we stayed with generally supported him as they felt that crime had plummeted since he was appointed due to heavy sanctions for anyone found with drugs. Interestingly, although it is legal to carry weapons in the Philippines, gun and knife related crime is exceptionally low. We definitely felt very safe during our time there, even at night time, and it seems as though this is a thought shared by many Filipinos. Conversely, many are concerned about his approach to human rights. Following his appointment he openly encouraged the public to kill 'drug pushers' and many related to drugs have indeed been killed under his presidency. Despite this seemingly strict attitude government is remarkably devolved in the Philippines with 2 notable examples that we encountered. The first being smoking. Smoking is banned in all public places in the whole of the Philippines however some areas are relatively relaxed with people still openly smoking and cigarettes easily and legally bought in most shops whereas others enforce a ban even on selling cigarettes, with heavy fines for those who do. The second example is in healthcare. Rural health units just 20km apart experienced huge discrepancies in resource allocation. Tabon-Tabon RHU, where I was situated, was relatively resource rich with the local mayor taking a keen interest and even implementing ingenious solutions to poverty and plastic waste by exchanging 1kg of plastic in exchange for treatment, rather than money. In stark contrast, Santa Fe RHU, just 20km away, was over staffed with little to no resources so patients were unable to receive basic care even if they were able to afford it. This was under the mayor's discretion and he showed little interest in implementing change.

We were lucky to be staying with our host family during the St. Nino festival, a month long celebration held in May during which all the children perform a nightly parade whilst singing and holding candles. At the end of the month there is a large celebration in which they all receive sweets. It was the first time TzuChai was able to participate and her excitement was palpable as she ran out of the door to join in, before turning back and pulling us to join her.

Overall, I had the most wonderful experience in the Philippines which would not have been possible without help from GIFT. Not only are the Philippines rich in culture, they are full of some of the most welcoming and kind people I have met and they are also truly beautiful islands. I would wholeheartedly encourage anyone with the chance to partake in a homestay experience as without it I feel that my understanding of Filipino culture would be sorely lacking. I would also recommend VFV to anyone considering a project abroad as the wide range of projects they offer is immediately beneficial to the local community and provides a fantastic experience for all volunteers.

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<http://www.visayans.org/>



Left to right; Siargao island, whale sharks in Southern Leyte, Sohoton caves and Bohol chocolate hills