

SPECIAL EDITION NEWSLETTER August 2012. CHRISTINE – GRAHAM STEVENS' DAUGHTER - TELLS OF HER EXPERIENCE OF THE WORK OF DORCAS IN MANILA.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

.....**LASTING IMPRESSION.**

Family holiday.....somewhere hot....? What could be nicer?

The Lonely Planet travel guide describes a country of great beauty, Manila a city full of places of interest to visit and a bustling night life (not that I expected to be sampling much of that....I was travelling with my father after all!!)

The crazy confusion, and heavy moist heat of Asia hits me as soon as we leave the airport in Manila. I'm a tourist, safe in my car, looking out on a world far removed from home in 'Dublin's fair city'. However, within a very short time, I am jolted from this comfy reality, into a realization that it is not going to be THAT kind of holiday.....not only have I left my time zone, I am to find myself well and truly out of my comfort zone!

"Pull OVER, PULL OVER" Cries my dad excitedly. For him this is a kind of homecoming. While I am weary and jet lagged and longing to get to our hotel and a bed, he is energized and invigorated with the meeting of old and dear friends again. He is excited to see everyone and can't wait to get started.

(Oh, how little do I realize what is in store!!!)

The car pulls in, (unashamedly blocking

traffic, to a perfunctory blast of car horns), and to my confusion we all leap out of our air conditioned car onto a dirty street corner on which sit a few sorry looking street vendors. I'm not sure why we do this, but being well reared I obey my father and follow suit!

It soon becomes clear that dad is greeting an old friend, Maricel, a lady of indeterminate age, shabby clothes and bad teeth emerges to hug him. Her



Home under the bridge

children (to my consternation) dart across the veering traffic to join us. There is a small baby of 5 months, a grubby toddler naked but for a dirty t-shirt, a little girl of 4 or 5 five and a boy with wary eyes of around 10 or 11 years of age. They all live on the stretch of pavement upon which we stand. I hover awkwardly by as Sol and my father talk to the mother of these waifs, comforting her and trying to persuade her to allow the two older children to come and live at the children's home. Her distress at the thought of parting with her children is evident. Her oldest son is already gone, (arrested?) and she cries into dad's shoulder talking about him. She avoids the offers and talks about the children going 'tomorrow'. Sol buys them some food and we leave them on the pavement. Back in the car I find that I cannot get the pain in her eyes out of my mind. I imagine having to try and make such a choice for my own children and even the imagining of it causes my own heart to contract with pain.

So commences my trip - a different type of tourism where I am brought from place to place to wonder and marvel not at the beauties of nature or the ingenuity of man, but at the poverty and extreme living



Home for a family of five...

conditions of others....

People living in tiny makeshift shacks on a hill of mud, or in the middle of the city dump, from which they scratch a living in the filth, scavenging or making charcoal. Whole families living in a pedicab (the bicycle side car that is barely big enough for two Europeans to sit in - dad is not a small man!) Families sleeping on the pavement under a ledge/ under pieces of plastic/under bits of wood.

Beneath a bridge, in dank darkness and stifling heat, thirty families or more crammed together in tiny makeshift 'apartments'. Above them the traffic thunders, below them a filthy river flows. They, at least, are protected from the weather. It is the rainy season, it rains heavily and we scurry from hotel to car and huddle under umbrellas, all the time

wondering how these people fare with this added misery.

But..... Although the poor living conditions, and terrible stories of abuse and poverty were unrelenting, this is not the lasting impression with which I return to the comfort of Greenwich meantime.

I was also brought to visit the places of refuge and support provided by Kanlungan and others, and supported by Dorcas.



Christine learning some Tagalog from a boy in Kanlungan

I met the boys who have left the streets behind to work on the coffee farm, and the younger boys going to school and doing their chores in the boy's home. I met the girls in the girl's home, singing and dancing doing their school projects and bible studies. I met the group at Potter's

Hand Drop In Centre, providing food and love for children and encouraging them in their studies and supporting them where they can.

I met the team running the drop in centre in Manila, and got to know the children there. Also in the children's refuge run by Sol; the first place these children go when they are rescued from the streets, to be counseled and helped to adjust to their new existence.

I saw the boys working in the coffee shop and the second hand shop next door. I heard about plans to provide pedicabs to give some of the boys a chance to earn a living.

Seeing and hearing about all the projects that were in place and being planned was the only thing that made the rest bearable. I could see that there was hope for the children. There was an escape route for some of them at least, and I was filled with an immense respect for the team of



Bringing some happiness to children of the dump

workers that labored for these children day in day out year round, often for little pay.

But..... Although the work that was being done was inspiring and filled one with hope for the future, this is also not the lasting impression with which I return to the comfort of my home.

The thing that made the greatest impression on me, and I think the thing that has caused my father to return time after time to this great and troubled city ; is the people. On the streets, despite the appalling circumstances in which they found themselves, they always had a smile for us, were always so generous in their welcome of us to their homes. They did not resent our good luck and wealth. In the Children's homes and Drop In Centre's, they were so grateful to dad for the work that he does, and by extension to Dorcas and all the sponsors. So full of humour, so ready to make a joke. However little English they had, they would find a way to have a laugh.

It is hard to describe how humbling was their acceptance of their lot in life, and their complete faith in God. Their belief was all encompassing and flavoured every thing that they did.

But the children..... My lasting impression will always be the children. On the surface so happy, so willing to play, to sing, so affectionate. But their little hands in mine, arms entwined around my neck and waist told me how lacking in attention their lives may have been.

In the last couple of days in Manila, we returned to that first street corner, and met Maricel again. Her little daughter and another little boy who had run away from an abusive family agreed to come to the Children's home to live. We took them, hungry and dirty in the car back to house where they were taken off to be fed and washed and given new clothes. I spent a lot of time playing with the little boy to help try and settle him. He responded to this small bit attention with fierce affection, and clung to me till I had to leave. 'Because' explained Hazel, our driver, 'he isn't used to an adult playing with him'.

They were still there when we returned to say our final farewells. (A good sign because the boy was a runaway) and my lasting impression will always be the feel of his skinny little arms around me, his dark eyes looking at me as I left to return to my own children, and the distressing feeling that I was leaving a job unfinished

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Unused !**