

# THE ACTS OF KINDNESS

By HIEU PHUNG NGUYEN



My mentor once said, “What you put into is what you get out of it”. It has been my dream for the longest time to be able to serve on a medical mission in a developing country. Luckily last month, in February, my dream came true. I had a wonderful opportunity to join the Ohana Medical Mission trip to the Philippines as a volunteer. I was able to spend 12 days in different cities while providing healthcare to an underserved population. From 8 in the morning to 5 in the evening, those days were challenging but rewarding at the same time. I definitely received more than what I was able to give.

I remembered about a week before we flight out, the news about the massive eruption of the Taal Volcano, and then the highly contagious Coronavirus frightened me. Then some technical issue happened so our connecting flights were delayed for about an hour. At that time, it felt like a sign that I shouldn't go, but nevertheless, I did not want to pass on a once-in-a-lifetime learning experience. The idea that come to my mind while reflecting on what the mission has taught me is gratitude. It taught me to be thankful for the little things that we all often take for granted. Toilet paper, for instance, wasn't provided at most places in the Philippines. I work registration at an urgent care, and I know how frustrating the insurance or just healthcare system in general is, I was actually disliking the idea that the insurances run the system. Surprisingly, after this mission, I also became grateful for the healthcare system we had here in the US. I know that if there is a person with life threatening condition, they can be treated and cared for despite whether they have money or not, or that we have ongoing care for chronic diseases like blood pressure, diabetes, etc. These are the things that are inaccessible for the people in the Philippines.

8AM is the usual time we arrived at the site, we immediately set up and it didn't take long before the crowd started to build up. The first day in Pasuquin Sport Complex, Ilocos Norte, at the sight of hundreds of people lining up, my heart was filled with excitement, compassion and the knowledge that I'm about to learn, the people, the culture, the diagnoses and treatments. Everyone, from elder folks, adults, to small children carried their younger siblings, was waiting to get free consultation and medicines or just for some multivitamins. Everyone was so patient despite waiting in line for long hours. You could see the smile on their faces when it's their turn to be seen. I was shadowing Dr. Debbie Fermin. Being the only Vietnamese there, I thought I was the only one with language barrier. However, there was also a slight dialects barrier between doctors and patients. Nevertheless, we have wonderful volunteers who could speak both so the process of diagnosing illnesses and trying to explain the doses of medications became easier. We were still able to laugh and make jokes to keep the spirits up. On the second day, In Ilocos Norte, at Sarrat Civic center, I worked with patients at the pharmacy trying to explain medications and finding substitutions for the ones that we don't have due to limited resources. Although I was constantly asking questions and sometimes, I felt like a burden, Dr. Nogot was so kind and patiently explaining the medications and doses so that I could distribute them correctly. But the most memorial thing on the second day is I got the opportunity to scrub in minor surgery. I was amazed at the skillful hands of Dr. Dela Cruz. Dr. Rosario was so humble to teach and



always made sure to include me in the conversations with patients by translating everything to English and explaining the diagnoses and procedures in detail. I was so thankful for learning surgical skills from Dr. Dela Cruz and Dr. Rosario. Our OR nurse Armie was kindly taught us so many things about sterile procedures and names of surgical tools.

The next few days, I was exposed to many different scopes of practice. We travelled to Ilocos Sur, I continued helping out at minor surgery at Cabugao Health Center, Guantacia Sports Center, Sinait Sport Complex and then San Esteban Municipal Hall. I remembered that around the time when we supposed to be done, there was still around 40 children who were still waiting to get circumcision. We had to turn them away due to time constrained. Also, there was an elder with a deep cut and teared tendon was waiting for surgery. It seems like he had that wound for more than a week but can't afford to go to the hospital. However, with tools we did not have, we had to consult him to go to the hospital instead. Despite the fact that we had to turn our patients away, they thanked us anyway and said goodbye. I proudly jumped from station to station. At Cuantacla Sports Center, I shadowed Dr. Jacang at pediatric, I still couldn't forget the crying adorably children we've seen that day. Kids being kids, they were scared of seeing doctors. Some of them smiled brightly, some was terrified and started crying. At the dental station, I got to see tooth extraction procedure, the dentist numbed the area around the tooth then he went ahead and remove it. All of these happened less than 10 minutes while the patient was sitting up straight. I was shocked but fascinating at the same time.

Although the clinical experience I got was truly incredible, my favorite part of it all was that I was able to build a relationship with the doctors and medical students.

During the CME, they allowed me to participate in discussions and ask questions. I also got to practice my Filipino dialects, I learned the most important word for all doctors, "sakit" which means pain. When we allowed for personal time, I got to spend time with my fellow pre-med students, we talked about stars, moon and our dreams. We also got to try so many foods and I never knew "Longganisa" ever existed, I fell deeply for the vinegar Longganisa and thought that I can really eat this everyday. We got to see so many beautiful, glorious churches and exploring the vintage city, Vigan via a Kalesa. I will always look back and think about how lucky I was to be able be part of this mission, to meet these amazing people and spend an incredible 2 weeks together. This mission not only allowed me to learn the Filipino culture, but also about the young doctors who are so inspiring and hard-working. Despite the fact that they were all preparing for their US residency program, they still gave part to their limited time to help their community.

Overall, I've had a life-affirming journey. This mission gives me the power of hope and caring in making a better life for all. I'm so thankful for all of the wonderful and dedicated Manong and Manang who welcomed me, taught me and worked with me. I can't wait to go again!! Dr. Sonido once said, "even though the mission is only short-term relief, your acts of kindness will be remembered forever." There is something about giving back and helping those in need or just being a useful part for a cause always gives me butterflies in stomach, an overwhelming sense of reward. I hope to continue mission trips and urge others to do the same for a better impact on global health.