



CATHOLIC MISSIONS PHILIPPINES IMMERSION 2018

On December 7, 2018 four Year 12 students from St Joseph's College Mildura, along with twelve students from St Francis Xavier College Beaconsfield, led by Catholic Mission, travelled to Cebu for a Philippines Immersion as an alternative Schoolies Program. Students were accompanied by their respective teachers; Paula Cox, Liam Doherty, Rachel Macdonald and Vithiya Sat Hiavan. During the ten-day program, students were involved in the service learning activities of making village paths and garden beds, gardening, tutoring and general community work in the Philippines, while they were immersed in the culture and traditional life of the country.

The program offered an opportunity for 'solidarity learning' requiring students to engage as equals, form relationships and learn from each other. One of the aims was for students to return with new found friends, a broader vision of the mission of Jesus and the work of the Church, and a commitment to that mission to reach out and give life. While students developed an understanding of the work of Catholic Missions and deepened their own faith and spirituality and re-affirmed their commitment to building a more just and peaceful world.

One students' perspective of the program upon return:

From the moment Miss Paula Cox first introduced the idea of an 'alternate schoolies' immersion experience, I leapt at the chance to be a part of this inaugural trip for St Joseph's College. I saw the opportunity as a chance to broaden my perspective and perception of the world; as you can never truly fathom just how lucky you are until you experience the most abject of hardships.

When Phase One of the Immersion Program began and we met Daniel Kuzeff (Catholic Mission Facilitator) for the first time, I was excited. This signified the commencement of our immersion, as he taught us a bit of the background on the Philippines and discussed the logistics. He introduced our gathering song to us, 'Castle on the Hill' by Ed Sheeran, and presented us with our journals and got us to write down our hopes for this immersion. I can safely say that I achieved my hopes during the Immersion, and then some. Daniel had us all in high spirits as we eagerly awaited December 7, when we would arrive in the Philippines and begin our once-in-a-lifetime experience.



As soon as we touched down in Manila, we were hit with the humidity and we all knew that it had well and truly begun. From Manila, it was a transfer to Cebu, which meant another flight, and then a bus to our hotel. I have never seen less regard for road safety than I did in Cebu, as people would turn into oncoming traffic and expect them to stop. Once we arrived at our hotel, we were all so tired and went straight to sleep. At this point, we had met our fellow travellers from Melbourne, but we didn't really get to know them until the second night, where Daniel had organised a speed dating activity for us to open up and get to know one another. This formed the basis for the immersion family.

We started our first full day in the Philippines at a local market in Cebu, where we were required to purchase fresh food for us to share with the orphanage girls from the The Good Shepperd Welcome Home for lunch. The girls taught us traditional Filipino dances and songs while we returned the gesture with showing them the Macarena. The

afternoon was spent teaching the girls how to play the board games and cards that we had donated to the home. I presented the girls with our donation of \$32,000 Filipino dollars to be used by the Sisters to run the Orphanage.



However, when we left Cebu, and arrived on Bantayan Island, was when the immersion truly began. We arrived in the ANCOP Village Malbago after a forty-five minute Jeepney ride, a vehicle which is definitely not designed for Australians, and were instantly welcomed by the whole village. It was a very poignant moment for all. After arriving, we were divided into three teams - cats, dogs and pigs. I was in the cats team, which our group decided to name 'Pussy Patrol' and these small groups helped to strengthen the camaraderie felt throughout the group as a whole. Throughout the week we spent in the village, we grew really close with the children and their families, so much so that they treated us like their own siblings. During this week, we experienced traditional Filipino pastimes, cuisine and their culture, and it was such a humbling experience as we saw firsthand the vast disparity between our respective lifestyles.

During our stay at Malbago Village, we helped the local village families build paths, garden beds and kitchen flooring. We also donated funds in excess of \$115,000 Filipino dollars to purchase gardening equipment, build eight family kitchens, connect four sewage systems, build a community washing area and buy more library books. Our donations of sporting equipment, games and books were gratefully accepted to be put into the community library. For me, the hardest part of the whole trip was saying our farewells to the village - not 'goodbyes' but rather 'see you later's'. There was not a dry eye in sight.



After our arrival back in Cebu, we all knew the immersion was coming to an end, and I don't believe there was a single person who wasn't sad. We had a lovely final day in the Philippines, spending time at the St John's Baptist Children's Home in Talisay City, with young trafficked women, hearing their personal stories and visiting a game arcade with them. Again another donation of \$34,000 Filipino dollars and women's health products were given to the Home to assist with running the facilities. Then it all came to an end. Our ten day Immersion was finished.

We said our goodbyes to Daniel at the airport in Cebu and then flew home to Australia, arriving in Melbourne around 4.00am. I can honestly say I have never looked so longingly for a McDonald's meal as I did when we arrived. After our early breakfast, it was time for our new Melbourne friends to go, and we all said our farewells. From then on, we were just looking forward to going home to Mildura, but when our flight got cancelled and we ended up with a six hour layover in Melbourne, we weren't very happy, but we were all too tired to complain.

When we finally touched down back home, there were mixed emotions. We were all happy to be home, obviously, but sad that we couldn't spend more time with both the immersion family and all the Filipinos we met along the way. I was also happy I didn't have to listen to any more Ed Sheeran music as the song was played to us over and over.

This experience is one which will live long in my memory and I cannot recommend it highly enough. It was an experience I will never forget. Thanks to the College for organising this wonderful, challenging and rewarding experience. A huge thank you to all the individuals and groups that kindly donated funds or goods for us to donate to the local Phillipino Communities. I only hope that this Immersion opportunity continues into the future.

Nic Rensen, Year 12 Student 2018

Hannah Files-Burke – PA to Deputy Principal