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A Finished Road, a Simple Life, a Meaningful Summer

30 university students and teachers from Metro Manila and Cebu (Philippines) came together for ten days during the summer break to build an access road to the cemetery in Bogu City, Cebu. There they made a startling discovery: the joy of simple living.

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“What’s up?!” With that short phrase my friends and I greeted each other warmly when we met in Amber Drive University Center, a center of Opus Dei beside the University of Asia and the Pacific in Pasig City (Philippines). We were en route to *Odlot*, a small community in the north of Cebu, to build a road from scratch stretching from the main highway to the community cemetery. In Cebu, we joined forces with other students and teachers from Sugbu Study Center and CITE, a technical institute that was built in 1990 with the encouragement of Blessed Alvaro del Portillo.

Work camps are a venue for the youth to do concrete service for underserved communities through building or fixing basic infrastructure. Through interaction with the community, the “workcampers” grow in meaningful experiences and human solidarity.

Since this year we were building a road towards the town cemetery, we joked among ourselves that this was going to be not a “stairway” but a “road” to heaven!

The Quiet Community of *Odlot*

Our home base was the parish house of the *Virgen de los Remedios* Church, thanks to Monsignor Ildebrando Leyson, the parish priest and a member of the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross. Aside from providing us lodging, he celebrated Mass for us regularly. We immediately noticed how in *Odlot*, the church serves as the center of all the town activities like seminars, sports, and gatherings. Every night, Msgr. Ilde organizes a living rosary, either in the Marian garden beside the church or walking around the streets of the town. It was heartwarming to see a lot of young people my age being so involved in

the life of the town and the parish, even to the late hours of the day.

Located in a sixth class municipality in Cebu, *Odlot* would not make it to anyone's list of top tourist destinations in the Philippines. But the beauty of this small community lay in the warmth and kindness of its people. The simplicity of these *Cebuanos* was highlighted by their kindness, hospitality, and warmth toward us. They made it easier for us to adjust to our almost-spartan living conditions: sleeping with only mats on a concrete floor, waking up at 5 a.m. to prepare food, and washing dishes.

Our experience of difficulty and the people's joy amidst their own difficulties taught us how to be simple again. We were surprised at how happy we felt just by tasting their cheap but delicious breads. Seeing the smiles of the *manangs* (old

ladies) when we greeted them, “*maayong hapon*” (good afternoon) was enough to take away our tiredness from the day’s work. Many of us realized through these encounters that sometimes, we can get caught up in our personal concerns that we forget the joys in ordinary things. These experiences were in stark contrast to the bustling metropolis life back in Manila. It enriched us “big-city” folk in a rather unexpected way.

Daily Work in *Odlot*

Building a cement road was not a walk in the park. Even though *Odlot* is a community nestled beside a pristine, white-sand beach, this work camp was not a beach vacation but real work in the service of others. We started the day with prayer and Mass, then we took a quick breakfast. After changing to work clothes, it was off to seven hours under the sun,

carrying bags of sand and gravel, mixing cement, and paving the road. We would return to home base for lunch and get-together, then it was back to work until sunset. Seven days like this wasn't easy. What made the work bearable, was that we knew that there were thirty of us contributing our time and energies to work for those who needed help. We constantly encouraged each other by cracking jokes, pulling each other's leg, or simply asking, "**What's up?**" at random moments.

It helped that at the end of every working day, we could swim in the beach nearby or play basketball or volleyball with the townsfolk in just our *flip-flops*. And we had two memorable excursions. One was to a beach in the municipality of *San Remigio* with its incredibly wide sand bars. Another was to the islet of *Capitancillo*. *Cebuanos* and tourists flock to this tiny island for its white

sand, clear waters, and rich sea life. These two days served to recharge our batteries for the remaining days of work.

As the work progressed, we discovered more efficient methods, like using a van to transport the sacks of sand and gravel, taking interval shifts, and advancing the sacking of materials for the next day. We gave everyone a chance to try out the different jobs while maintaining the pace of the work. At the end of the ten days, we had packed around 800 bags of sand and gravel and some two hundred bags of cement to complete the 100-meter “road to heaven.”

Long-Lasting Bonds

When I look back at the work camp, I can say that I wouldn't have spent those ten precious days of summer any other way. Working on the road, beating the heat, and living with my

newfound work camp friends, was a downright fulfilling experience.

When I remember the smiles of the simple folk, I wonder how happy we would be if we lived more simply.

They taught me with their lives that human beings could be happy even without the best living conditions or the latest technologies.

As my fellow work campers and I returned to our individual homes, we knew how we would greet each other when next we meet. It would surely be with the same greeting that we started with ten days previously when we met at Amber Center - only much warmer and longer this time, as in: “***What’s uuuup?!***”

Kyle Reiner Pineda (with Robert Cortes)

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