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Better Than Boracay

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I am a travel freak. I love going around to see, to learn and to experience new things. A few days after the school year ended in April, I and my friends spent a ten-day vacation on the “beach-to-be-in” - Boracay.

We did island-hopping, snorkeling, dancing, partying, eating, and swimming. I met a lot of new folks, tried adventurous stunts, and had a coconut oil massage while watching the sunset. It was a fantastic treat for a university student who had just hurdled his final exams. The island drowns away one's worries and problems - making the world seem like a perfect place - it's just you, your friends, and the most beautiful beach in the world. I had a great time! It was so much fun, just relaxing, enjoying the beach and bonding with friends. “Things can't get any better!” I told myself.

Or so I thought.

UCF Summer Work Camp

I flew back to Manila and two weeks later, I was off to another ten-day adventure, this time to Tuba, Benguet. It was definitely not on the top of your list of “must-go-to” places, but Tuba was the host of one of the Summer Work Camps organized by the University Center Foundation (UCF). The UCF Work Camp was recognized by the World Bank as “The Longest Running Youth Development Project in the Philippines” in the recently concluded Responsible Citizenship Fair of 2003. Since 1981, this project has helped some 45,000 families in rural areas and depressed communities throughout the country.

It was the adventure of this summer volunteer work that I, together with 35 other male students from various university centers in Manila, Iloilo

and Cebu, signed up for. It would be my first time to participate in such an outreach program. Our camp was scheduled for April 20 to May 1, and the objective was to do school repairs and roadwork for a depressed community. “Easy enough!” I told myself.

Or so I thought again.

Community in Tuba, Benguet

We arrived in our host community in Tuba, Benguet, after traveling seven hours, first by bus, then by jeep.

Tired from the long ride and rather restive because of the many unfamiliar faces, Work Camp Director, Miguel Lim, told us that there was a sudden change in plans. “What will we be doing instead?” one of the surprised volunteers asked. I remember Miguel answering, “We will clean the canals.” The volunteer got more surprised!

But what struck us more immediately were the houses we were to stay in for the next ten days. They were old structures in disarray and barely habitable, with spartan furniture and fixtures, and electricals and plumbing needing repair. Exhausted from the trip, people had to first tidy up the accommodations. It was unbelievable we actually got to sleep there. “This is nowhere near my Boracay hotel,” I texted my friend.

That night was nothing compared to the day that followed. After being given safety tips on how to avoid accidents in the workplace, we toured the community to check the canals that we had to clean. I was amazed that they were no different from the ones in the depressed areas back in Manila where I teach catechism. They were greasy black, with every sort of garbage imaginable, human waste, and

unusually large worms and cockroaches swimming beside empty bottles and junk food wrappers. The same type of canal on top of a mountain, hundreds of kilometers north of Metro Manila. Astounding! But more astounding was the fact that we were going to clean it.

Canal dredging

So on the first official day of work, equipped with shovels, gloves and wheelbarrows, we embarked on the task with great spirit of volunteerism. We removed the steel covers and looked in disgust at the not-so-pretty sight. But so what? We were here to serve a community in need, with our labor and skills. It helped to remember St. Josemaria Escriva's teaching that work, regardless of what it is, if we did it well and for love, was an offering to God.

With that in mind, and after making sure that the gloves did the job of covering our hands, we got a good grip of our shovels and started dredging the canals. Now, our work would never have been finished if our main concern were to avoid getting dirty water into our gloves or sandals. So, soon after, the volunteers started to go down the trench to dig out bigger scoops, crawling carefully and stepping on some rocks to avoid getting too much greasy black water on their feet.

It did not take long before the pace of work picked up, and as the team became more synchronized, a lot of progress was achieved faster. No one was too worried anymore about dirty water and no one was uncomfortable with the stench. Some guys even started cracking jokes to lighten the load. Undeniably, it was an unusual way to bond with new friends. It was nowhere near my Boracay

experience of bonding while on a sailboat. Despite that, everyone did what they committed to do - else the community get flooded during the rainy season, and the residents easily contract diseases.

Teaching Math, English and Catechism

A few days after we started our sewerage work, six of us volunteers were assigned to teach Grades 1-3 students Math and English, and another six to teach Catechism. We spent the mornings on these educational tasks. It was difficult to keep the kids attentive and to get them to recall the lessons previously discussed. We had to think of a reward system, like giving candies or promising to play games with them after class, to get them interested and glued to our classes. It did the trick and the kids started to cooperate.

It was heartwarming to see how some students arrived in their classrooms much earlier than the call time, eagerly waiting for their kuya to come and start teaching. They looked forward to each meeting. The bond between the kids and the volunteers grew during that one week. I myself was surprised when my students, aged 6-8, refused to be dismissed for lunch, demanding that we meet again in the afternoon so I could teach them more. They even insisted on helping me to clean the classroom, wipe the blackboard, and lift tables and chairs. “This,” I told myself, “is some story to tell my folks back home.”

A full day schedule

In the afternoons, cleaning work resumed, and for one to survive such a hectic schedule, one really needed to keep his spirit of volunteerism alive. Our schedule was to get up at

five in the morning daily. Work followed morning prayer, Mass and breakfast. After lunch and rosary, it was back to work until merienda time at four. Then, we unwound by playing basketball, badminton, and yep, duck pin bowling. After dinner, we had talks on virtues and work. It was a full day schedule - an ideal schedule, where work, play, and prayer all fell into place perfectly.

This was the routine every single day, for ten days - work, prayer, sports, meals, rest, talks - a schedule all the volunteers got used to. Boring, some might say. But one thing holds true: with such a schedule, and with the cooperation of everyone in the camp, we were able to accomplish what was asked of us. We gave it our best in our work and the community was most grateful. That was more than enough reward for me.

A unique ten-day experience

On my way back to Manila, I carried tons of unforgettable memories in my now seemingly short ten-day stay in Tuba. I gained new friends and I got the opportunity to clean canals - a job I never imagined I could do. I also developed a closer relationship with God.

I met up with my barkada a few days after and told them about my ten-day experience in Tuba. Grossed out, shocked, and stomachs churning, all of them insisted I should have gone with them instead to Tagaytay, to Batangas, to Ilocos or to Bohol. But I told them I wouldn't have it any other way - it was time well spent.

The place was perfect. It was a place where I faced the problems of society, and not escape from them. It was a place of inconvenience, and yet I was comfortable. It was a place where my job was to clean canals and teach children, not to build

sandcastles and go snorkeling. It was a place where I could see God's calling for me to help those who need me, and not a place to go wild. It was physically and psychologically taxing, but it was done for a purpose. I found meaning by forgetting about myself and looking after others - and I know that the rest of the volunteers felt the same way and have this experience etched in their hearts.

It was truly a unique experience - and I could say, with all sincerity, that those ten days in Tuba, were definitely a lot better than Boracay. Definitely.

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