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# What I Did Last Summer

An account from BusinessWorld of a summer leadership-outreach seminar for teenagers in a Tanza slum of Iloilo City. The seminar was sponsored by the Daguiao Foundation, a non-governmental organization established by some members of Opus Dei that promotes educational and social projects in and for the island of Panay.

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Now that the rainy season has officially been declared, I can't help but grieve over the fleetness of summer. Summer this year for me had been totally out of the ordinary. I spent a week in May –hot, dense and extreme—with 16 teenagers in a leadership-outreach seminar in one slum in Tanza, Iloilo City.

Annually, Daguiao Foundation, the NGO I work for, in the hope of promoting leadership and values formation for the youth, supports a team of high school and college students in a work camp. Patterned after DAWV's (Developmental Advocacy of Women Volunteerism Foundation, Inc.) "Servant-Leadership through Volunteerism Work Camp," the week-long seminar is a "fusion of theory and action which includes a lecture series on the prevailing and appropriate concepts of leadership applicable to the Philippine scenario, and a work

camp where the youth leader participants undergo experience in manual labor and community development designed to improve and rehabilitate the living conditions of a poor community”.

The initial preparation for the camp was most bloody, very un-Thoreauan. There are usually a thousand and one items to procure, a hundred and two ideas to consider. First is the problem of recruiting able participants who, on their own volition, commit themselves to an unpredictable week of challenging labor and indiscriminate habitation. What teenager in her right mind would exchange her much needed break after slaving it out during the academic year, or would be willing to sacrifice eight days of her precious time off from school to help a poor community, plant greens under the heat of the sun, and chase kids with runny noses? (Activities in the work

camp included tutorials in Math, Science and English; teaching catechism and values, art and sports to kids; imparting human development classes and livelihood projects to teens and mothers; manual work like repainting of a school house, taking part in the Clean and Green Project and assisting in a medical mission.)

## **HIDDEN AGENDA**

But, wonder of wonders, close to 20 girls expressed interest. Some said they would do it to earn needed social work credits for their last stretch in college, others admitted it would spice up their resumé. So much for altruism and patriotism. These girls each had their own hidden agenda to accomplish.

Among those who signed up were two high schoolers, two incoming freshmen in the university, 11

university students and one moving on to Medicine proper.

## **FOOT SOLDIERS**

During the week, I worked hard. And so did the girls. In fact, it seemed to me that the girls worked harder than I did. At the end of that work camp week, this collection of “foot soldiers” under my custody won my heart and yes, racked my brains out. This platoon of young women braved the heat, held dirt and stood by the wretchedness of poverty. They accepted suffering heroically, and as I had personally witnessed, suffered gracefully.

Most dramatic for me was seeing the girls rise above difficulties that primarily challenged their characteristically volatile nature. They conquered their fears of “unknown territories” lying beyond their actual capacity, or what they thought was their maximum

capacity. Some resiliently pushed their way to the limit (what they thought was their “dead end”) only to discover a realm beyond the borders of their potential.

Some never thought they would ever be able to dig holes on the ground with a big spade, give cooking demos to mothers whose basic occupation was cooking, walk under scorching heat, not so they could sport a tan, but to invite and befriend squatter folks for the classes, lie on mats instead of sleeping snug in their fluffy beds, wake up early to cook breakfast for their camp mates, smile when the most normal and licit reaction was to complain, do as instructed despite their relentless propensity to rebel, etc., etc.

## **BAFFLING**

Who would ever expect that teens of this day and age can actually make

the choice of complicating their lives for other's sake? I was baffled.

I admire the girls for their courage, their daring to choose “the road less taken.”

It's funny how my constituents ended up teaching me a great lesson: that only in selfless giving will one find genuine happiness and a true sense of fulfillment.

When on our last day I could no longer keep my little secret, I let these eternally nosey girls in on it. I confessed to them that what I thought was going to be a nightmare turned out to be an honest-to-goodness vacation. They actually made “my ideal summer holiday.”

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