

2015 Alternative to Schoolies Initiative Philippines

PARTICIPANT'S REPORT



Group photo after a long and difficult day at the school rebuilding the drainage system.

*L – R Front: Casey Williams, Jack Conlan, Clare McIntosh Phoebe Cody and Ayesha Plant
L – R Back: Crystal Vella, Tim Sheely, Zoe Duynhoven, Gemma Gibbins, Tyler O’Keeffe,
Scott Gall, Christine Arthur, Natasha O’Keeffe, Bonnie McKenzie and Shelby Jenkins*



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Bonnie McKenzie 16yrs old
(South West Leo Club Vice President)

Encompassing into a mere 500 words the adventure, insaneness and overall enormity of the past three weeks in the Philippines seems like an impossible task but nonetheless here it goes...

Our day starts at 5.30am; up and sweltering in the Jeepney our transport for a breakfast of the essential coffees, garlic rice amongst many other delicacies. "Pull out" and away we go to dance in front of over a thousand children providing them with first class entertainment from Oz as we frail around the steps as their stage. Shelby Jenkin's incredible rendition of the National Anthem and we are ready to start a day of teaching children the ins and outs of AFL and Netball – not to be confused with the American Rugby and Volleyball. My reflexes in catching rouge handball and basketball thrown netballs have become rather on the point. I'm sure I could handball with the best of them now.

A few more classes and it's the long awaited lunch break call. Some more incredible food and then it's off to the world where white skin and blonde hair leads to you being the centre of attention and "autographs?", "cuddles?", and "selfie?" will be the only three words you hear apart from thank you for the next half an hour.

Along the way you will become an expert at trawling stagnant water and mud from the bottom of drainage systems and as a result may become kinda ill with a combination of simultaneous vomiting and the runs that will be a wonderful experience for ALL to enjoy...thought at that time it may not be much fun, it will become an odd bonding experience for a room of three, that ends up being the "quarantine room" when all fall sick.

If you ever heard the saying "respect your elders", a new found appreciation will be formed when in the Philippines. Blessings and the very hard to master task of not looking people in the eye will become second nature when in the presence of an elder. Making sure you go back for about three rounds of dinner is essential when attempting not to offend an elder, serve yourself little so nothing goes to waste; always give a helping hand to those who overserved if your stomach has room.

Although this is only a small part of the experience, an extreme gratitude for the country I live in has become so prevalent in my life after our last day with the most optimistic people I've ever known. Being privileged enough to be welcomed into their homes and allowed to interrupt everyone's schedules to do our bit to help out is something I will never forget. Giving those who need it most the simple things I know I take for granted, gave me the realisation of all we had done for these people in our tiny time overseas. And yes during my trip a fair few tears were shed especially when we heard the stories of what an eleven-year-old girl can do when placed in a situation where there is nothing else to do. They were all tears of complete and utter appreciation for the experiences I have been given and of hope that the little we have contributed can make even the tiniest difference to the lives of those who treated us with such kindness and openness in our time overseas.



Shelby Jenkins 16yrs old

Mixing cement the hard way!

In 3 weeks we managed to rebuild a drainage system, teach 33 classrooms and start laying the foundations for an orphanage. If someone had told me we could achieve that much in such little time before I left, I would've called them a liar.

When we first signed up to this program, we didn't know how much time would be spent in the classrooms and how much physical labour we would be doing. I'm glad we spent time working in the projects because the same lesson plans for 33 classes became rather repetitive and uninteresting. The interaction with the kids was one of the best parts of the whole experience. We were swarmed in the playground at the school and there were always kids hanging around at the worksite.

I saw children with more potential than me, a better work ethic than me, yet they don't have the opportunity to achieve what I can living here in Australia. Whilst teaching in an overcrowded classroom, there were a group of 4 boys huddled around a table sharing a pen between them. This was an image that stuck with me because a pen is something that is so easily accessible in Australia. This is just an example of the many things I took for granted, the long list including a flushing toilet.



The food was amazing to say the least. We had breakfast and dinner pretty much every day at the same house. We all sat around a table full of food, sometimes candle-lit during blackouts, and gorged ourselves. The pineapple was the best and the durian was the worst.

The thing I was dreading the most about coming over to the Philippines was the Mt Apo hike. Just thinking about it made me feel sick. The bus trip there went too fast for my liking and before I knew it we were sardined into the back of a ute and driving on a bumpy road. Even though both my legs were numb and my back hurt I didn't want to get out and climb the mountain. But I did. As soon as we had crossed the river I knew I was ruined, but I kept going (not by choice). I wish I could say I overcame my physical incapability and powered up that mountain, loving every moment, but that was not the case. I hated it all and almost cried tears of joy when the decision was made to turn back. The hot spring was nice but not worth the trek.

I went over to the Philippines because I wanted to help. I wanted to achieve something long lasting that I could be proud of. Not only did we do this, but I was also given new friends, a culture shock and a nice tan. I left the country full of self-belief and motivation. Thanks to G, I know what I can do when I put my mind to something.

Phoebe Cody 16yrs old

Three weeks is a long time away from family, friends and life in Australia, especially when the longest you've stay away from home is the odd one-week school camp. This was different. Three weeks in a foreign country, three weeks of hard work, long days and minimal communication. What on earth had I gotten myself into? I asked myself but it didn't take me long to work it.

4hrs on a bus trying to convinced Shelby that she hasn't forgotten anything important, didn't leave much time to think about the fact that I was actually on my way to the Philippines...for three weeks! And in between checking in our luggage and the anxiety creeping in as it was weighed (only 2kgs heavier than it was meant to be, no big deal), quick farewell Australia snaps and one last final toilet stop – still wasn't much time to think about it. It was only sitting on the plane, Geraldine crushing the tiny bones in my hands that it finally sank in. I wasn't going to be in Australia. People weren't immediately going to understand me; I was going to be the foreigner. And as the plane began to descend, the bright lights of Singapore shining up at us I was starting to feel something.

One bus trip and 3 planes later, we arrived in what would be our home town for the next three weeks - Davao City. To say the heat wasn't a shock would be a complete and utter lie. Already questioning my reasoning behind wearing long pants, a singlet top, my polo top and a hoddie, we lined up at what would be my first experience with customs. It was surprisingly quite, the customs people unsurprisingly dull and then we were through. We were officially in the Philippines! Grabbing our luggage, we headed off into the unknown world. Climbing into a jeepney (transport) which we were told would become our second home aka where we took naps, excitement and anxious conversation were starting to be released. We zoomed past the streets and people at speed that I would rather not think about and broke more Australian road rules than I'll ever care to think about and finally we came to El Bajada Hotel, our actual home for 2weeks. Everyone unpacked and we all prepared ourselves for what was going to be the hardest but most rewarding trip of our lives.

The next few weeks were full of blood, sweat and I'm not ashamed to say a few tears. We hit a few blockages (get it because of the whole drainage thing) but together we overcame each and every one of them. We all grew stronger, closer and got a nice tan along the way. It's amazing how much bonding you can do carrying a bag of dirt with someone. We accomplished more than we ever thought possible, rebuilding a school drainage system, starting the base of an orphanage, teaching over 2000 students something about our home and seeing how even the smallest gesture can mean the whole world to someone. We may not have done every single thing we hoped to do (I'm looking at you Mt Apo), but we sure did one heck of a job and gave it everything we had.

*With my partner in crime
Casey Williams.*





Giving out my pre love stuffed toys to one of the underprivileged students at our last day.

Coming into this program I wasn't sure what I expected. Maybe a bit of lifting here and there, a lot more kids per classroom and being way more scared than I was. At the end however, I realised I was tougher than I first thought, luckier than I'd ever known and was now far more aware of the world than I ever could have been. I'd made so many friends, memories and maybe even extended family a little bit. It was a long and hard ride but one that I'd take again and again.



Hard at it with Xave Gibbins



One of the many classroom visits...

Christine Arthur 18yrs old

Going to the Philippines was an amazing experience that I will never forget. It was challenging emotionally and physically. I never thought that I would actually enjoy Physical work but it was really fun especially working in a team no matter how hard it was. Seeing the kids so happy despite their unfortunate situations and knowing that you're making an impact in their lives really made all the hard physical work worth it. What I enjoyed the most was spending time with people that I never would have spoken to if not for this trip. It was a great opportunity to get out of my comfort zone socially and I was forced to really get to know everyone that came to the trip. I really loved the white water rafting which I had done before. Even though I failed to climb the Mt Apo miserably, I still loved the experience. The only thing that I didn't like so much was the early mornings but I got used to it pretty quickly. Overall, the trip was actually better than I expected and even though it wasn't a holiday it still felt like it in more ways than one. It's a once in a lifetime opportunity and I would have regretted it if I didn't go.



Sand sifting... 16 truckloads of it!



*Who needs a wheel borrow...?
Doing it in style.*

Natasha O'Keeffe 18yrs old

Going over to the Philippines was a great experience and I am so glad that I decided to do it. Working at the school getting to meet and socialise with the kids make my day and theirs. There was always a smile on the face of every child upon seeing us and knowing that we are there to help their school. There was such an overwhelming feeling of achievement knowing that in three weeks we were able to make such a huge difference and change to the school environment and in the lives of the students. The work that we accomplished on the orphanage site in just a short amount of time (in 9 days) brings me fulfilment knowing that our hard work will eventually pay off and will turn into a home for children who desperately needs it.

Overall the trip was possibly the best thing I could have done. I enjoyed being able to spend my time making a difference in the lives of those who needed it and being able to provide the children with opportunities in life. Spending three weeks with people who you don't know and working so closely with them friendships were formed, there is also the chance to get to know the locals and see how hard they work. This trip definitely wasn't a holiday; you couldn't just sit back and have a free ride. You have to pull your weight, work as hard as you can because in the end there is extreme satisfaction when you know you've done the job.



Making of the beams... my new found skills!



Clare McIntosh 16yrs old

After leaving Warrnambool and a long day / night travelling we arrived in Davao City, Philippines! We were all very excited to be there and it was so interesting to see the difference from home. Apart from the heat, the first thing I noticed was the difference in driving. Firstly, we were travelling in a Jeepney with no seatbelts. The traffic is crazy but there isn't any road rage. I'm sure if Melbourne drivers attempted to drive in the Philippines it would be a completely different story. The Jeepney trip were very fun. Whether we were trying to find a comfortable position to sleep or singing along to some classic songs from home, it was always a good time. Very thankful for our driver Rechie in keeping us safe.



The weekend activities were really fun treat to have; a bit of a break between working at the school and the orphanage site. Not that you could say our attempt to climb Mt Apo - the highest mountain in the Philippines was exactly relaxing. After a 2am start and a long drive on a very bumpy road in a mini bus and then the back of a truck, we started our climb. I don't think we realised how big of a task we had signed up for. It was definitely hard work and we gave it our best shot – we obviously didn't make it to the summit!



Paradise Island was a great day to relax. It was lovely to swim at the beach after our failed effort to climb Mount Apo the day before. Pagsajan Falls was really cool even though we couldn't go the whole way due to heavy rainfall, we still got to go up stream on the canoe which was a very different experience. It was really beautiful.



Davao River White Water Rafting

It was expected to come home with a few cuts and bruises. There were a few just from doing the physical work but most of my scratches and bruises happened when I fell out of the raft during white water rafting adventure. It was not a surprise to me to be the only one to fall out. It had to be someone and it made a good laugh for everyone. It was really a fun day.



Teaching was so rewarding, I thought it might be really hard to teach so many kids in one room and to get them to concentrate on a task but they were really eager to learn about Australia and our lives. We taught 33 classes ranging from kinder to Grade 6's. We felt like celebrities in the school yard, being watch as we ate our lunch or put on our sunscreen and then signing autographs and posing for pictures. It was a completely different experience that would never happened at home. I will miss seeing the kids smiling faces every day.

I am so thankful for the opportunity to go on this trip. It was an amazing experience and something I will never forget. I hope that one day I can go back.



Casey Williams 17yrs old

Never would I thought I would have been wrapping up 2015 in the Philippines but yet on the 20th of November we flew out to experience the world. When we first arrived in Davao City we were all taken by the immense heat and we instantly regretted our decision to wear long pants. It took only 30min for us to experience our first big cultural difference. The Jeepney! A Jeepney can be best describe as a vehicle with a cab at the front and the back seats are similar to long couches than run parallel to each other, long story short travelling by Jeepney meant you lost all personal space and this is how it is for the next three weeks. On Monday we started our first official day at school. We began our teaching rounds. Shelby and I focussed our lesson plans on Australian animals and as we were in classes between 50 – 70 students we had to make sure that we were loud, clear and talked slow. I was personally amazed to watch nearly every child's eyes nearly pop out of their head when they saw a picture of a kangaroo. All the students were excited to see the pictures and when asked to draw these animals, they would go into immense detail including all features and writing down all facts. I was intrigued by observing the different level of comprehension between class levels. The younger grades were just so happy that you were there and that you were talking to them but as we engaged with the older students they would fire questions to us wanting to know more about our homes and about ourselves. They were so eager to know more about us.



Our first day at an official flag ceremony... it was intense yet loving all the attention!

In between our teaching, we were continually jumping in with the schoolies group in helping rebuild the drainage system for the school. This consisted of carrying many buckets of dirt, rocks and pebbles, emptying the drain of stagnant water and mixing cement. To slowly watch the drain be formed and see our progress along the way helped me keep going and often made me smile.



By the end of the first week we had finished about half of our teaching rounds and half way through the drainage system. That weekend we were ready for our first leisure activity, summiting Mount Apo. Although we didn't quite make it to the summit it was still an experience I will never forget! Climbing Mount Apo was quite physically strenuous and on the mountain we all displayed fantastic team work and determination.



Mount Apo – the tallest mountain in the Philippines!

The kids were infatuated by us. We spent our lunchtime signing autographs, accepting gifts and smiling for photos. Due to immense excitement the kids had no idea of the concept of personal space. They would hug you when you were talking, hang onto your arms and would push through each other just to be closer to you.

At the village we were in the process of digging trenches and forming the foundations for the orphanage. We were very busy at both the school and the village so when the weekend came we were all uber excited to go white water rafting. With minimal spills and no broken bones one may say it was a letdown but it was such a fun experience flying down rapids and praying it wasn't you that went flying out the side.



We were very lucky the following week to have sometime in Manila. There we had a run at bartering, went on beautiful canoe ride and were able to see the difference between the two cities. We finished the week back in Davao, wrapping up jobs on the site and any business in the school. Our final Friday prior to coming home we had the privilege of providing care packages and tim tams biscuits to 33 underprivileged children at the school. It broke our hearts that there were 150 underprivileged children at the school but we were only had the resource to provide for 33; that day was testing for even the strongest member of the team!

The following day we flew out. We all felt with a whole new mind set on the world. Over the past three weeks we experienced real poverty like no other and saw how it affected the children and their families. We also learnt that despite how bad their home life is or how little food they had in their tummy, all the children were just so happy every day and were so thankful to be given the opportunity to be at school.

This trip opened my eyes to how different and lucky Australia is compared to other countries and how many opportunities that I have at home that I may take for granted. I learnt that not everyone has it easy as we do and we should really be thankful for what we have regardless of our situation. Untimely, we all came away thinking about how we are all in position to do something positive with our lives and then go forward to help others who are not as lucky as we are. The Philippines 2015 trip is an experience I will never forget in my lifetime.



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What we have achieved in 23 days...





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