Dear Friends,

Well, we made it back from the Philippines once again, with the same number of folks with which we left. PLUS 2011 turned out to be a banner year in a number of ways. You may recall that I set a lofty fundraising goal of $9000, which would have put us at an all-time total of $50,000 raised. Well, thanks to so many of you, we met and exceeded that goal, allowing us to spend over $11,000 on charitable projects! That record amount made it possible for us to do a great deal of work and make a tremendous difference in the lives of many people.

Because of your charitable giving, we were able to distribute 11,000 pounds of rice this year (which brings us to 60,000 total). While we all volunteer to help carry the bags of rice to people's homes, we are always amazed at the strength of the Filipino children who often insist on doing it themselves.

We also distributed roughly 50 pounds of children’s vitamins. (While we took many in tablet form from the U.S., most of what is sold in the Philippines is in liquid form, hence the weight.) There were also school supplies to be distributed, homes to be built, medical and dental procedures to attend to, and other basic necessities provided to our neighbors and friends in the Philippines.
During our first week, we were able to pay for and contribute to the construction of a duplex for the Castillo family. The Castillos are a hard-working family who have faced some hard times in recent years. When the 21-year-old daughter of Pito Castillo fell ill a couple years ago, the family went into debt to pay for her medical bills. Her eventual death left them nearly destitute. At the time of our arrival, they were being evicted from their home and had only a decrepit place to go, which was completely inadequate for the extended family. Weeks earlier, they had heard that some Amerikanos were coming to help build them a house, but they couldn’t believe it. In fact, their neighbors told them not to. When Diego, our foreman, showed up one day to take measurements, and supplies arrived soon thereafter, they believed their prayers had been answered. Eventually, our group made it there and we all started the work together. We tended to the grunt work of leveling the ground and carrying bags of gravel and sand to the worksite. This freed up Diego, Pito, and quite a few skilled friends and neighbors to attend to the construction work. The result – finished a short time after we left – was a beautiful new duplex. The Castillos now have a clean, weather-proof home for this year and for years to come. The family’s small candy-making business has a new base of operations. And the children have a clean, safe place to eat, sleep, and do their homework.
You may recall hearing about 5-year-old Roberto earlier this year. His family not only lives at a massive trash dump in Manila, but in one of the poorest areas of that community. It’s kind of hard for me to fathom what his life is like, even though I spent time inside their tiny dirt-floor shack, sweating from the afternoon heat that radiates from their leaky metal roof. Left without use of his left arm, Roberto has not been left without hope or the prospect of a better life. One of three kids sponsored through PLUS, today he is going to kindergarten fully stocked with school supplies, transportation, and a daily allowance for a healthy lunch.

One afternoon, while we were visiting the Smokey Mountain trash dump, we had the chance to take Roberto and the two other sponsored children to lunch at Jollibee (the Philippines’ most beloved fast-food restaurant). It was Roberto’s first time, and the ride there in the air-conditioned truck was clearly part of this epic adventure for him. All cleaned up, wearing his best clothes, he was able to order whatever he wanted. This turned out to be: ChickenJoy, rice with gravy, Coke, and a chocolate sundae for dessert. However, while at the same time packing food into his little mouth, he made sure to pack up an equal amount for his siblings at home. Seeing this, the social worker made sure to share some of his own food, so that Roberto would get his fill and have plenty to take home. Roberto’s sharing with his siblings is common in the Philippines, and one of those experiences that leaves me with a great deal to reflect upon.
While Roberto’s story is particularly poignant and powerful, he is only one of the many people who we have been able to help because of your generosity. You may remember Niko, who is being fitted for a glass eye. And there is Joshua, who lives with his brother and sister at Kanlungan Shelter, who will have surgery to keep him from losing sight in his left eye. A dental-care fund was also established for the children at Kanlungan Shelter this year. Nearly 100 pairs of plastic boots were purchased for the kids running around the Smokey Mountain trash dump barefoot. Waterproof tarps were purchased and distributed to families living on the streets, right as the rainy season was beginning. And kids are in school today because they were provided with the necessary uniforms and supplies they needed.

I always feel that my “thank you” at the end of a report like this is inadequate. Please know that we deeply appreciate the support you provide to this program. More than that, the people whose lives you help improve extend their sincerest thanks and gratitude as well.

Maraming Salamat.