This May saw the fourth PLUS Program trip to the Philippines. Eight of us headed off for two weeks of work, service, learning, and immersing ourselves into everyday life in the Philippines. The people we meet along the way are often surprised that we aren’t visiting beaches and resorts. I think I can speak for all involved, however, when I say that I’d rather spend time in the “real” Philippines than sip cool drinks on a sunny beach.

During our first afternoon in the Philippines, my sister-in-law Lerma took us out to a cemetery on the outskirts of Lipa City. There we found five small homes in the corner of the property, right alongside the cement tombs. The patriarch of the extended family living there is Tinoy Mendoza, a gardener at the Lipa City Cathedral. Church leaders permit him and his family to live on the cemetery grounds. None of the homes were in very good shape, but one house and the community bathroom were in particularly bad condition. And so, we discussed rebuilding those structures first. I was quite pleased when we were asked when we would like to begin and one of the students immediately replied, “Tomorrow!”
We decided to divide up the work. The Americans took charge of the “comfort room” while the hired carpenter went to work on the dilapidated house. With the help of the men who lived in the community, they set to work on that house at a furious pace. We quickly saw framing go up around the existing home and a roof of corrugated sheet metal nailed on. The small home inside was disassembled and walls were put up. Not only were we impressed with the industriousness of the men working, but we noticed that everyone was involved in one way or another. Adulthood does not wait until the mid-20’s in most parts of the world, so teenage boys were among the men working. Women prepared meals and did laundry, and children helped out where they could as well. Girls and boys helped out with their younger siblings, carried rocks, and mixed cement. It is remarkable to me when I see a 5-year old boy give a bath to his 2-year-old brother and realize that such relationships are the norm in this world; it is our society that is different.

When one of our larger “Amerikanos” stepped through the floor of the outhouse, we realized we had additional work and opportunity to improve the bathroom facility that is shared by about 25 people. New framing went around a new cement floor, as well as a solid roof and proper drainage for after bathing. Others created an underground PVC pipeline that kept the common walkway from being a muddy mess. Some new walls were installed on another home, taking the place of a porous tarp. And while the final project – replacing the leaky roof that covered three homes – was only begun at our departure, we were able to leave behind sufficient supplies for the job to be finished.
And, of course, there were kids to play with. While “duck-duck-goose” and coloring may seem like minor diversions, the smiles on these children conveyed that more was going on than babysitting. These children, who survive on less than $1/day, living in a cemetery, could see that they were important and worthy of others’ time. They were not nameless faces of poverty. Jordan, Michelle, Rhea, Mike, Mary Grace, and a dozen more became our friends. Also, we were able to buy all of the schoolchildren new uniforms, backpacks, and a pile of school supplies.

While the majority of our time in Lipa City was spent with the extended Mendoza family, there were others we helped as well. Kenneth Brian Agojo, who I have known since he was a baby and lives in conditions worse than the Mendozas, is finally ready for first grade. He also received a uniform, shoes, socks, underwear, and school supplies. In fact there are quite a number of kids in Lipa City with school supplies this year because of your contributions to this program.
Two children make money at the rock quarry by selling “ice candy”

The all important staple of rice, which has increased in price significantly in recent years, is always a priority for us. It has been the people we help who have repeatedly told us that what they desire most is rice. As a result, sacks of rice were distributed to the five families we worked with, the Agojos, laborers at a sugarcane plantation, 90 families who live and work at a rock quarry, and a host of others. In total, we distributed 9,000 pounds of rice. This brings us to a grand total of 39,000 over the years. (I’m still hoping we make it to 100,000 someday.)
While much of the help we are able to offer people puts smiles on their faces and ours, there are times when there is no joy in doing the right thing. On our first morning in Lipa, we visited the extended Clemente family – friends who we worked with two years ago. The retaining wall we helped build for them still stands strong today. However, this time the joy of our reunion was muted. I was brought into their home to see a sick infant. Four-month-old Josephine Repuesto lay on the wooden floor, covered by a small sheet with a pillow under her head. I’m still not clear on the infection that had left her blind and deaf, fighting for her life. I spent some time with her and her parents before having to take my leave. Later in the afternoon, I happened to see her father, Robert, on the street. I waved and walked over to see him. He told me, “My child is dead.” It was then that I looked up and saw we were standing in front of a funeral home. Robert’s family, like the Mendozas, lives on less than $1 per person/day. Fortunately, we had the funds to pay for the funeral expenses, including the five day viewing of the body at their home, so he could lay Josephine to rest with the dignity she deserved.

Our time in Manila, like our time in Lipa City, was a combination of enjoyment and sadness. The work we did at the Kanlungan Shelter helped improve their new facility, making it a more attractive place for the children and staff. The interaction between Filipino kids and American students is always instructive for both groups; we always learn a lot from each other. New friendships are forged, old relationships strengthened, and we can do our small part to support a ministry that offers so much help to children who had been abused by those entrusted with their care.

Our trip to the Manila Zoo with the kids from the shelter
There were also two trips to Smokey Mountain, a trash dump on Manila Bay and home to a few thousand people. Of all the experiences in the Philippines, this is always the most powerful for all of us. Very often we find ourselves with conflicted emotions. The depressing poverty and living conditions are juxtaposed against smiling children eager to have their pictures taken. The chasm of difference between our lives and theirs is overwhelming, yet our now annual basketball game – Filipinos vs. Amerikanos – drives home our common humanity.
In the end, I can clearly say that PLUS 2009 was a great success. Aside from some mango jam being confiscated at customs, everything went very smoothly. Our record-fundraising allowed us to achieve a great deal for many living in extreme poverty, beyond what is recorded here. Through individual contributions, we raised just over $3000. Along with some institutional support, we were able to spend roughly $5500 on charitable projects plus an additional $780 on construction supplies.

As in previous years, I recognize that we who travel to the Philippines are fortunate, as we get to hear their thank you’s and see their smiles. But please know that it is your generosity than enables us to impact their lives. What you give makes a huge difference to them. On their behalf, thank you very much.

One of the children for whom you provided food, clothing, and vitamins