June 8, 2010

Dear Friends,

I am happy to report that all of the members of the PLUS 2010 team that left for the Philippines in the middle of May have returned, safe and sound. This fifth year of our program was a great success: we exceeded our fundraising goals, deepened relationships with partners, and kept ourselves so busy we had little time to complain about the record heat. It was exhausting, but highly productive, gratifying, and enjoyable.

We exceeded our fundraising goals by $2500, allowing us to do a great deal more than we had planned. With a charity-budget of over $8000, we were able to build a duplex in Lipa City for two families – a monumental improvement over the decrepit shelters they had been living in. We were also able to fund the building of a church/community center in the middle of the Smokey Mountain community. At the rock quarry, where 91 families each live on about $23 dollars/week (in exchange for a sixty hour work week), we distributed 10,000 pounds of rice. (This brings our grand total to 49,000.) Additionally, we were able to purchase dozens of school uniforms and mosquito nets, various multi-vitamins, food, clothing, and a host of other needs.
While I have been involved in this work for nearly ten years now, there are new things I learn every year about effective poverty relief. While I had known that being unable to afford eyeglasses means that the world is a perpetual blur for many people, I had never before thought about the headaches that result from poor vision. It was 70-year-old Tita Ligaya who pointed that out to me this year. Fortunately, one donor’s request that we pay for an eye exam and glasses has meant that Tita Ligaya can now keep a much closer eye on her grandkids. (Interestingly, she is the second “Tita Ligaya” for whom we have purchased glasses over the years.) For the cost of a nice dinner in the US, Tita’s life made a dramatic change for the better with her new glasses.

Left: Tita Ligaya, before getting her glasses, with three of her grandchildren wearing new school uniforms

Right: Another of Tita Ligaya’s grandchildren with a shovel during one of our work-breaks.

Duplex under construction. Left: Future resident Ray (aka Batman) refuses to take a break in 100 degree weather.

Right: The entire team, plus a few more future residents.
Rayver taking a bath, Filipino style. (The baby’s vitamins are barely visible to the right of the red bucket.)

Some of you may remember that I was planning to spend more money this year on mong beans. While we were able to do that, a Filipino friend with a nursing degree pointed out to me that mong beans are high in uric acid. This means that they are a poor choice for the elderly who suffer from arthiritis, gout, or kidney problems. Also, for communities who have little access to water (like the folks at the rock quarry), cooking them can be a problem, as they require considerable soaking. As a result, we had to be more selective in distributing them. My friend also pointed out that ampalaya (aka “bitter melon”) is a good choice for people with diabetes, and so I got to learn where ampalaya is sold in the expansive Lipa City market. While the staple of rice is not the healthiest food we can distribute, we recognize that when this basic need is met, it frees up resources that families can then direct to the meats and vegetables of their choosing. These efforts, coupled with prenatal, neonatal, and children’s vitamins make up a great deal of our work to meet the nutritional needs of the poor.

Family at the rock quarry.
Back in March, I wrote about a little girl who I saw last year, singing in the Smokey Mountain trash-dump community. Her little voice, singing of the transience of life and her faith in a loving God, had haunted me this past year. She was another nameless child caught in the grinding poverty that is many people’s plight in Manila. Well, the highlight of the trip for me this year was meeting her. The wife of the local pastor remembered who it was who had sung that song, and among the thousands of residents we found her. Joanna Marie Gacita is a bright, engaging 11-year-old, who her father tells me can be a bit stubborn. The daughter of Jumar and Jennifer, she has two older siblings and a younger one on the way. She told me that she wants to be a singer and fashion designer when she grows up, and prefers Celine Dion to Lady Gaga in both categories. Last year she finished 5th grade with good grades. This coming year, thanks to your help, she will be entering 6th grade with a new uniform, complete school supplies, an allowance for food at school, and public transportation to spare her the 30-minute walk each way. (Special thanks to Kanlungan sa Er-MA ministries for arranging those services.) She was kind enough to sing her favorite song for me again this year, which I have posted online with some pictures of children from her community: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7yDm4MNMmWA. This little girl stands a real chance at transcending her environment, and it is exciting to be part of that.

A tired little boy takes a break from collecting bottles in the heat of the day at Smokey Mountain.
With that brief overview, I will finish this year’s report. Once again, my sincerest thanks to all of you who help fund this valuable work we are privileged to carry out. Your generosity enables us to improve people’s lives in significant ways, and I recognize that we could do very little without your support. On behalf of some of the poorest of the poor, let me extend our heartfelt gratitude.