

### **AMA Kathryn Sullivan shared this reflection in our December newsletter.**

Greetings from the other side of the world! As the sun is rising there, it's melting the sea and sky together in hues of lilac out my window. It's just before dark in Barrio Obrero, Iloilo City, the Philippines. This small district juts out from the edge of the city into the sea, and as resilient as its people, weathers storms and waves from three sides. It became populated as a refuge for several waves of victims fleeing fires in the city during the last century. The school at which I live and work is Assumption Socio-Educational Center (ASEC), a Catholic mission elementary school serving this impoverished community.

Despite the magnificent sunrises and sunsets, life here is not an easy one, and the adjustment has challenged me in ways I could not have imagined. Serafina and I arrived at the location of our orientation in the Philippines after an odyssey through 4 countries, 6 airplane meals, and 18 hours accidentally spent in Beijing and shared a momentary meltdown over the conditions. It was the first of many times I thought that it was too much and I could not stay. The first two months I spent in the Philippines I came up against challenges that I didn't think I could overcome at times, and days when it felt impossible to go on. Those were the days I tied a rosary to my wrist and knew that I was testing the timber of my heart.

At two months in and when I felt almost at a breaking point, we had our first gathering of all the 23 AMAs in the Philippines. At this week long retreat, I reflected on my work and myself, I came to see that only by being challenged to my core could I confront myself and ask who am I, and who do I want to be? On a storming afternoon I stood at the ocean and asked God those very questions, and the waves answered me: joy. I learned that joy is not something that happens to you, but something that you must actively choose. I discovered that lesson Victor Frankl taught us, that you can only be miserable with your permission to allow external factors to affect you. Since returning to ASEC, I have enacted a monumental paradigm shift by reminding myself constantly to choose joy and reflect God's joy from my heart out into the world.

Concurrent with this internal re-calibration, I was reassigned to a new job within the school in which I have found enormous purpose and fulfillment. I have been tasked with breathing life into the previously rather abysmal school library--a challenge to be sure, but one I have taken into my heart. My mission is to create a space where the students can feel safe, loved, and inspired. Little about the school is kid-friendly with cement bare classrooms and dilapidated facilities, so I intend to channel any artistic talent and elbow grease I have, and can gather, to transform the place to somewhere the kids want to be and can cultivate a love for reading.

Last weekend I organized a successful volunteer work party to phase one - clean, sort, move and paint! During the school day and weekends students are always offering to help, so I enlist them in jobs big or small, no matter their age or ability, because I believe this is a chance for them to be invested in their new school library and take ownership of it.

## Reflections | Philippines

Armed with a new intentional floorplan, actual categorization of books, and big dreams, we've taken the first step in the right direction. I plan to have a comfortable reading nook at the back for older students with a carpet and bean bag chairs, surrounded by fiction books. I hope to create a kids land at the front area under the windows for children that I envision being full of color, stuffed animals, murals and decorations. In the back room I have placed all our encyclopedias, and someday might have computers to teach proper research.

These big dreams keep me working long hours, but I am filled with purpose, excitement, and chosen joy. Life here feels more normal and comfortable now that I am adjusting to it. I have been blessed to be able to look to the Sisters at the main school in the city as a source of strength, counsel and fun, as well as my family and boyfriend who have supported me throughout. I can now say that I am excited for what is still to come this year and that I will be facing both the good and the bad with joy.

**AMA Alum (Worcester and Philippines) Elliot Uvin-Simmons writes about his Philippines experience 2016-2017**

Round Two of AMA and Time is Running Out!

Hello Assumption Family! Kamusta?...It's your friend Elliot Simmons-Uvin, or as some of you might know me better as Mr. Moody. For those of you who were unaware of my whereabouts, for the past eight months, the cow has traveled 8,626 miles to Sibalom, Antique, Philippines, for my second year of AMA. This year I'm no longer called Mr. Moody, but now Joe. This year has been quite the adventure working as a teacher, exploring the Philippines with co-volunteers, and finding God in the smallest things.

My AMA year began way back in September when I became the Grade 6 English and P.E. teacher at Sta. Rita Academy (SRA). I remember entering the school for the first time, trying to poke my head into the classroom of sixth graders to see who my students would be, were they well behaved, how many were there, and how is there English? Then the day came, my first class, September 3, 2016. There were 43 new faces in front of me, their English was average, and they were excited to have an American teacher. The only difficulty was language. I couldn't understand Tagalog or Visayan, and they couldn't understand my English vocabulary. Despite the language barrier there were many moments that we enjoyed one another's presence. For example, we sang YMCA camp songs at the start of class, they asked endless questions about life in America and my personal life. We bonded over Pokémon, and even painted a mural together. As I got to know my students more, I started to understand the culture of the Philippines; the role of faith, and the sacrifices some families make just to make ends meet. As a teacher I have realized that it's the little things that you do that go a long way. The simple kind gestures that come from the heart; a simple high five, a joke, or spending five minutes after school to explain/finish a project that really makes the difference. Even though I am only here for one year, I have learned so much from my students, the faculty and staff of Sta. Rita Academy, and the RA Sisters. As I continue to adjust to the culture of the Philippines, I continue to be exposed to many challenges, and new opportunities every day.

There have been many "firsts" in my journey. My first time to go island hopping, to swim in a waterfall, to hike with slippers, to swim in a cold spring, to hitchhike, to ride a tricycle, to teach English and P.E., to commentate a graduation, to dance at the Department of Education Night and SRA Family Day, to go camping with the boy scouts, to try to learn a new language, and finally tasting the culinary art of the Philippines. These new experiences were a lot of fun, but at times they were awkward, uncomfortable, and sometimes even painful because I had to communicate with people with limited language skills, travel to unknown places, and go out of my comfort zone. It was these experiences that allowed me to take a leap of faith, to grow personally and professionally, and in the end to strengthen my confidence in myself and my faith in God.

## Reflections | Philippines

If I were to answer the question, “What is the one thing you will never forget about the Philippines?” I would say the people. The people have made my experience so fruitful and enriching. Here, I’m a tall white American, named Joe. Also known as Sir Elliot, or just “L.” I have especially enjoyed the AMA community; the Kamustahans, Mid Year, and Year End activities with the other volunteers really make you feel like you’re apart of one big family, with endless brothers, and sisters. Filipino’s are hospitable, compassionate, jokesters who really know how to make you feel welcome and have a good time - it is the people that have made this year an unforgettable experience. Some of you are curious I’m sure to what have I learned so far in these eight months. Well, I’ve learned to let go, to let of go time. By letting go of time I can be present in whatever journey awaits. These eight months have been a once in a lifetime opportunity to experience, embrace, and receive a different culture. I think its only fair for me to say, “Its more fun in the Philippines!” Talk to you all soon. This Joe’s got to go.

I’m grateful for all those who have supported me along my journey so far - both at home and here in the Philippines. I will leave with 3 goals in mind—learn as much Karay-a as I can, learn how to cook Filipino dishes and run from Sibalom to San Jose! Talk to you all soon. This Joe’s got to go.