

## To Our Friends in Pawa, Thank You

Rommel V. Gonzales

College of Medicine, University of the Philippines Manila  
Class 2013 (Region VI)

### ABSTRACT

These are my reflections over two years (2009-2010) in the company of UPCM RP (University of the Philippines College of Medicine Regionalization Program) students from Region VI while serving the people of Pawa, Capiz. These reflections are my memories that speak of how much I as a person, the group, and the community we served and loved have changed in that span of time.

*Key Words:* Pawa Capiz, University of the Philippines, regionalization, reflections

### Introduction

When one enters a new social milieu, he becomes curious and then he begins to explore the new world around him. Once he attains a comfortable degree of familiarity with the place, he asks himself *"Where do I fit in? Do I even belong here?"* These sentences speak of how I felt when I first came into the UPCM. My dream of becoming a doctor was being realized but a nagging feeling within told me something was missing. It was not until I encountered Rabindranath Tagore that I understood that joy in medicine was best found in serving other people. This Indian poet once said, *"I slept and dreamt that life was joy. I awoke and saw that life was service. I acted and behold, service was joy."*<sup>1</sup>

What follows are my reflections of two years (2009-2010) in the company of UPCM RSO (Regionalization Student Organization) Region VI while serving the people of Pawa, Capiz. These reflections are my memories that speak of how much I as a person, the group, and the community we served and loved have changed in that span of time.

### First Year: Coming to Know RSO and the Community

#### 1. Start Here

Sitting alone on a steel bench at Tagbak Terminal in that humid Friday morning made time coast by like a snail creeping across a wooden plank. I gazed at the partially

overcast sky hoping there wouldn't be any landfall until we board our buses and well on our way to Capiz. My thoughts stopped and my eyes panned the sky in search for something I knew not. The sun momentarily showed up and I gazed at it directly. At that moment, I re-learned the lesson that gazing at the sky invites the sun into your eyes in an act of reciprocity. It was a tearful experience, to say the least. Forgetting about the sky's condition, I turned my thoughts to what awaits me in the coming days together with people I knew nothing about save for their names. I walked my mind and saw worried and anxious thoughts in queues. I was apprehensive for several reasons: First, except for two individuals, the cast of UPCM RSO Region VI are total strangers; second, not having gone to any of their meetings, I didn't have the slightest idea what use I would be during the immersion and; third, I was not a UPCM RSO member and so I feared out of place moments in the coming days. In the end, I realized I was entirely wrong, and gladly so.

#### 2. Cutting the Tension Wire

When group activities started, my apprehensions melted in thin air as I realized: one, strangers as they may be at first, their warm and welcoming friendship made me feel connected to them after several casual conversations; two, plans were made daily so no one's left hanging static in mid-air. Everybody was kept busy as a bee through well laid out plans made nights and days before; and third, I never felt I was an outsider in the entire span of the immersion—I felt I was a genuine member of the team. I was not an RSO member, but in that span of ten days I was with them, my heart beat in unison with theirs, my thoughts turned like a gear, cog to cog with the members of the team within the machinery that was RSO. This internal attitude common among its members translated into actions that were wholeheartedly for the group.

I'm glad my heart knows not about memberships but only about friendships and good bonds that form between people. My heart connected with theirs and theirs with mine in the context of friendship and goodwill, and for that I was most happy.

#### 3. Community towards Come-in-unity

Much more than the chance to share knowledge about diabetes, urinary tract infection, malnutrition, hypertension, and breastfeeding to the community, the activity gave us a

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Corresponding Author: Rommel V. Gonzales  
Regionalization Students Organization  
College of Medicine  
University of the Philippines Manila  
547 Pedro Gil St., Ermita, Manila, Philippines 1000  
Telephone: 09052823702  
E-mail: gonzales12003@yahoo.com

heart that feels for them; a heart that identifies their needs; a heart that keeps genuine sincere intentions to help. Not only did it make us see the real scenario, but more importantly, it made us understand and address them in ways we know how. It left our hearts burning with the desire to serve them and empower them to take responsibility for their own well-being. It seemed every activity ended with an ellipsis that proclaims there's more to be done to improve the community. In a number of movies do we hear villains say, "Today, we conquer this community. Tomorrow, the world." Here, a parallel but opposite tag line may be said, "Today, we help and empower this community. Tomorrow, the world." I wish our hearts would continue to burn with the desire to serve and empower our people. I hope the word "community" would one day mean "to come-in-unity."

### Second Year: Proximity Works Magic

How does proximity work magic? Let me tell you an immersion story from the eyes of someone who enjoys comparing past and present experiences and who has felt a different tug in his heart during his second visit to the same community.

#### 1. Our Home in Pan-ay

Last year, we stayed in a house 30 minutes away from *Barangay* (Barrio) Pawa. It was a two-storey house, with comfortable beds and spacious rooms, and luckily just a stone's throw away from the church and convenience stores. It was comfortable living, to say the least. Each morning we'd wake up to the calming silence of our abode and with the assurance that our food is laid on the long dining table downstairs, our bathing water never runs out, and that our soiled clothes will be washed on time.

Once through with the morning rituals and the lecture materials and other instruments were wedged in the car, we braced ourselves for the day's work and drove our way to Pawa.

#### 2. Meeting For the First Time

When I first met the Community Volunteer Health Workers (CVHWs), I somehow felt they were slow to warm. The participants were there but their reticence in discussions was easily taken as a form of shyness. We faced the participants with formality that sometimes warmth is obviously missing. Psychology would insist that this is part of the process of getting acquainted with the community. They didn't know us well and so formality and cautiousness in conversations were to be expected. As days came and went, the participants and the group warmed up to each other and started to feel closer. And when it was time for us to leave, we felt the emotional tugs of friendship at our hearts. There were no tears shed in parting, but only smiles that somehow expressed two sentiments—"We'll miss you

*dear participants*" and "Thank goodness, we'll finally have our time for rest and recreation!"

We rode back to Roxas talking about our plans for the succeeding days with little allusion to the friends we left behind in Pawa. We came as visitors, we were treated as visitors, and we left as visitors. How we came was almost how we went.

#### 3. The Bell Experience

Let me just mention one thing that appears irrelevant in this part of the story. We were able to observe the group's tradition of visiting the biggest bell in Asia in Pan-ay parish church before we left for Iloilo. We climbed the belfry and stood next to the giant bell and had our group picture taken. This tradition has been observed since the group started in the community years back. How this fits into the story will be revealed later.

#### 4. Our Home in Pawa

"This place is right next to the lecture room (kindergarten building). Finally, we won't have any reason to be late for our activities," I told myself as I took a sweeping gaze of our new home for this year's immersion. It almost appeared similar to the house we rented last year, save for some differences I soon discovered. First, I realized there were no curtains over the windows. That means our lives would be a little less than private from now on. The only private place, if my memory serves me right, was the restroom, which also has a window but without even half-a-curtain over it. Second, the second floor becomes an 800W oven every noontime. It was almost uninhabitable because of the roasting temperature at that time of the day. Third, there's no running water from 6:00 am to 11:00 am. That means some of us would have to wake up at 5:00 am to take a bath and store some water for the rest of the group. Fourth, brownout strikes at around 1:00 pm to 3:00 pm almost every day. Translation—our multimedia projector is out of commission during this time plus it's sweltering hot inside the lecture room. Finally, at night, there is not enough space for all of us and our bags that some of us opt to stay downstairs and sleep on the couch.

#### 5. Knowing What's More Important

One may ask, "With all its inconveniences, who would want to stay in such a place?" Honestly, I am more than willing to. Why? Put simply, the benefit is more than the cost. Though I can only come up with one reason, it far outweighs all mentioned 5 inconveniences. Let me discuss why.

Though we didn't have the conveniences of our old house, we gained nearness to what really matters most. That is, the hearts and minds of those we serve—the CVHWs, the children, and the rest of the people in the community. We understood them better—their ways, their culture and tradition, and perhaps some of their individual

idiosyncrasies. We were no longer limited to seeing only the personalities of our participants, but we have gained a new vantage point that afforded us better appreciation of the “personality” or “social ambiance” of the community as a whole. Somehow that feeling of being a visitor we had last year slowly ebbed away and was replaced by the feeling of being a member of the community. The saying “familiarity breeds contempt” did not find any audience among us or the community. Familiarity bred respect, closeness, and love between the community and the RSO members. We talked with them, played with them, toured places with them, and enjoyed parties with them. Perhaps one of the signs that we were accepted in the community was the fact that they comfortably bared their hearts and hurts to us. Though they were our students, they were our surrogate mothers in the community who took good care of us. Took care up to what extent? Up to the extent of visiting us almost every morning to see if we were doing fine, of staying up late with us to look after the children when we had an overnight camp, of letting us stay in their houses to take siesta as they cook meals for the campers for two days, of accompanying us to far places to see other members of the community for public health lectures, of helping us in buying materials for other participants, and most especially of always being there when we needed them.

Perhaps the best proof that we were loved by them were the hugs we received and the tears that were shed for us when it was time to leave. On our part, the best proofs of our love for them are the stronger desire to serve them and empower them and the memories of them that we hold and cherish in our hearts.

Last year, I wrote in my reflection that someday I hope community would eventually mean to “*come-in-unity*.” This year, I realized that this is no longer just a hope but a nascent reality waiting its full realization. I only hope that we keep our hearts aligned with this desire of serving communities, and that it never die in us, but instead continue to grow and strengthen until we fully become doctors with a heart throbbing for the community we have come to know and love.

#### **6. Missing the Bell Experience**

This year, we missed out going to the giant bell in Pan-ay parish church. The tradition is broken. Are we sad about this? I would say, no. We exchanged this experience for memories that not only touched our minds but also our hearts. We were in the community when we were supposed to be high up there in the bell tower. The happiness we felt being with our community far outweighs the joys of being next to the giant bell. It was a good bargain which made us all happy.

To our friends in Pawa, we thank you for everything. You will always have rooms in the homes of our hearts. Until we meet again.

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#### **Reference**

1. Rabindranath Tagore Quotes. Available from <http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/r/rabindrana134933.html>. Accessed October 2010.