

A Reflection on the SEE Program

By Ces Rondario

When you're 20 (and single), your world would most likely revolve around school, family, friends, clothes, movies, partying, the opposite sex—among other things. It's during this time when you start thinking about your future, you're slowly preparing yourself as you map out your world. It can be pretty exciting. But for one 20-year old I know, things unraveled quite hastily, leaving her thoughts with priorities unfamiliar to most her age. It has been four months since her world view was challenged and her boundaries broken.

And let me tell you, my life hasn't been the same since April.

I have always been sheltered; nothing was asked of me except decent grades and I was stuck in that rut thinking there wasn't anything I could do. Although I was always encouraged and was well aware of what has become of our world, I confined myself to dwelling on the trivial things I was accustomed to—and seeing everyone else doing the same didn't help any better. But despite the nugatory things I was busy tending to, I had a dream. A dream to touch lives, spawn change and forge impact. It never dawned on me that I would be realizing that dream so early in my life, but that I did.

Since its conception on April 18, the SEE Program has undoubtedly turned my life around. True to AIESEC fashion, my team and I took on the challenge of welcoming 14 international volunteers to become

stewards of the Social Entrepreneurship Experience (SEE) Foundation. Apart from recognizing the relevance of the program, the fact that this would be the first PBOX of AIESEC Philippines, added a whole lot of purpose for the project. While the thought of bringing 14 foreign souls to our shores was a cause of excitement, it was the nature of the project that kept me up at night wishing it was already morning (so that I can work on it again). The PBOX, otherwise known as the SEE Program, "commits to harnessing the entrepreneurial spirit of the Filipino people, fuel their potentials and provide channels of opportunities while compelling them to become better stewards of the society." The trainees immersed themselves in total Filipino living as well as giving probable aid to the growing problem of unemployment and poverty as they mentored micro entrepreneurs either to develop their business plans or run their already established businesses. We believed that this was a fitting gift to the country and to its people. We engineered the project in a way for the foreign volunteers to have a full-on view of the Philippines' condition and hoped that despite what they see, they'd fall in love with the country nonetheless.

Wanting to expose the trainees to everything Filipino, we went all out—food, music, language, habits, sites, culture and its reality as a country. They dug through crap, built and painted walls at



Gawad Kalinga, and to our surprise, they kept going back. They held art therapy sessions with hearing impaired and autistic children, home stayed with poor families, visited a cooperative, attended countless business expos and seminars; they visited museums, saw downtown Manila, went on exposure trips to Bohol, Banaue, Tagaytay, Palawan, Pangasinan, showcased their countries with the weekly international nights we held for them, saw government offices and officials, met the president and along with all these things, they mentored, helped and inspired the micro-entrepreneurs they met. They were here for only two months but the impact of their everyday commitment to help and be one with the project made all the difference anyone could ever imagine.

Yes, it was tough. Traipsing around to town (trainee-sitting as I liked calling it), tending over 14 foreign people bearing different cultures, traditions and opinions, and losing sleep (and money) wasn't really my idea of a weekly itinerary but nevertheless I took the plunge. I never knew what



for the trainees, was a curved blade that pierced through my heart. I put so much into it that 90% of my days were spent working for the project and the other 10% were spent thinking about it. What I went through for this was just as funny as they were mind-boggling. I don't think I have put up so much impossible hours before, slept so little, worked so hard, visited the airport that many times. I never ever thought I would be spending so much time (or anytime at all) in

tired really meant until after the PBOX but what I was fortunate to witness daily made all the long nights and back pains of no consequence. It was so humbling to see foreigners opening their hearts to the people they've met and imparting whatever they had. I remember seeing them working so hard in Baseco while volunteering for Gawad Kalinga and thinking that despite all the problems our country seem to never get enough of , we're lucky

have people from well-off families and nations willing to dig through crap only to help build someone a home. I felt that if they took the time out to sweat and get dirty, then who are we to sit around and memorize every possible show there is on TV?! It was a reawakening for me and if only everyone had the chance to see what I did, then maybe something good might turn up soon.

This project, inasmuch as this was



the Immigration or in a police station (don't get any ideas) and I never dreamed it possible to hike 8 hours but all that, I did and boy was it all worth it.

I knew at some point that I would be moved by this experience but little did I know that my life would be enriched a hundred thousand folds. My life has definitely been changed, impermeably and forever.

From the experiences came the lessons that I've gathered. From understanding cultural differences, to patience, time management



(ehem), resourcefulness and even forgiveness. I have learned the value of humility and discovered what genuine service really meant. I have learned to control my emotions, took responsibility more seriously, gracefully owned up to mistakes and relearned what optimism was all about. I bore witness to the impossible heights one can climb to get to the highest peak, be it conquering a real mountain (in Banaue) or the challenge of delivering excellence in everything we do. I was again impassioned by the people I have been blessed to work with. They remain the pillars ever so steadily holding me firm enough to stand tall. This project wouldn't have made it through if not for them... I am the leader that I am because of the team that I have. I have made great friends from across the world while deepening those I already have. I don't think anyone can be more blessed.

To top it off, I traveled and saw the Philippines in a new light, with new awakened eyes. I never really took much notice (as I'm sure most of you as well) but looking at



the expressions of wonder written across their faces, I slid a tear or two, not only because I know they've truly fallen in love with our country but because, thanks to them, I too have fallen all over again, if not more. Every time they'd stop to bask in a view or express thanks for someone's generosity, I stand back and smile. It was a long time coming but I can't stress any further how proud I am to be Filipino.

The past months has been a two-

way track, I gave just as much as I have given. I can never pick out one favorite moment from the whole experience primarily because each carved its own niche in my heart. I will forever hold dear the goofy antics each of the trainees had, the stories, opinions we shared, the hugs we exchanged, from the arguments we had to the problems we overcame. But the true gift that this experience gave me was how much I have grown as a person and how much I have gotten to know myself more.



The SEE program has drawn to a close. The curtains have been dropped and behind it are the people who gave it their all despite the many challenges. There were slip-ups but for those who saw the program for what it truly was about and recognized its contributions, the mistakes are but interesting surprises that popped out every now and then. It wasn't perfect but I can most certainly say that it deserves an encore.