

Jim Henle

Country of Service: Philippines

Assignment: Teaching College-Level Mathematics

Service Tour: 1968-70

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Service Description:

I signed up to teach math in high school in the Philippines.

In Peace Corps training, I was schooled in Philippine culture and given some classroom training. Our group, Philippine Group XXVI, was divided into four. Each subgroup was trained in one of the many Philippine languages. I was trained in Cebuano.

I had no experience teaching, no education classes. I was a math major. And I did, of course, have four years' experience being a student in a high school classroom.

My primary motivation for joining the Peace Corps was to escape fighting or supporting the war in Vietnam. I had been accepted for a PhD program. The school said I could postpone entry into that program for two years.

When Group XXVI arrived in Manila, I found out that I would be teaching in a college, not a high school. Further, it would be in an area where the language wasn't Cebuano. It was Ilocano.

I arrived in Baguio in the North of Luzon, the largest island in the Philippine archipelago. Few of the instructors at the College spoke Ilocano, most spoke in Tagalog. Fortunately for me, all knew English. At that time, English was the medium of instruction in Philippines schools.

I arrived toward the end of the first semester, so I had a month or so to get ready. Most of the faculty (all Filipinos) were like me in that they had no advanced degree in the subject they were teaching. They were wonderful, helpful, cheerful, and fun to be with. The dean, who had a doctorate from the University of Chicago, was especially helpful to all her faculty, helping us become the teachers she needed us to be.

There were other Peace Corps volunteers in Baguio, but I didn't associate with them. That wasn't the mission. Social life centered on the College and it satisfied my needs.

Experiences that stood out:

Months after completing 16 years as a student I was suddenly a teacher. Students only a few years younger were calling me "Sir!" It was unreal. But many of the Filipino faculty had made a similar leap. The dean of the College helped all of us grow, helped us to understand our mission. She kept us focused and she also kept our spirits up with parties and trips.

I found teaching most satisfying. But I was unhappy with the American textbooks being used, especially in teaching calculus. I persuaded two Philippine colleagues to join me in writing a text

that would do a better job connecting Philippine students to the material. Those colleagues and many others in the faculty remain friends today.

The most important lesson I took from the Peace Corps experience was to respect. Respect the culture. Accept as friends those who befriend you. Respect the intelligence of those in the country who are placed above you. You can't meaningfully make suggestions without respect. I learned from Filipinos as much as they learned from me. It's all about understanding.

After three months on Luzon, I flew to Cebu for the Christmas holidays. On the plane, I suddenly thought: "I'm alone! I know no one here. What if I can't make a connection, what if I am threatened by---something---I don't know what?" But I knew already then, that if I asked a stranger for help, I would receive it, that Philippine culture would insist on it, that help would be freely and generously given.

I came away from the Peace Corps experience feeling that on this Earth, we are really one family. Despite our differences in cultures, religions, and languages, we are all humans. We can be friends.

Epilogue:

I came home to the U.S. in 1970. The war in Vietnam was still hot. I was drafted. Ultimately, I was successful in getting conscientious objector status. I did two years' alternative service from 1971 to 1973, teaching math to 6th, 7th, and 8th graders.

I have stayed in contact with my colleagues of those years. There have been reunions. One, in which the dean attended, took place at my home in Massachusetts.

The value of my service to the Philippines:

Filipinos were already accustomed and acculturated to Americans. The value of my service added to that in a small way. But Group XXVI met following our two years' service and voted to end the program of sending Americans to teach in the Philippines. We argued that Filipinos could teach and that Americans coming to teach reinforced the idea that somehow Americans were better than Filipinos at teaching. We didn't think that was necessarily true. And since the Philippines was a former colony of the U.S., we felt it especially important not to damage Filipino self-esteem.

The value of my service to me:

My two years in the Peace Corps opened worlds for me. I learned more about myself, more about the world, more about what it means to be human.

I am currently reading Rick Steves' book, *Travel as a Political Act*. It details how much he learns visiting other countries, meeting residents, and sharing their lives, however briefly. By engaging with people in their environment, he could draw lessons about people everywhere, about America and its responsibilities, and about our shared humanity. That's exactly the value of the Peace Corps. Joining the Peace Corps is, in Steve's sense, a political act that informs one not only as a citizen of the world but as a citizen of the United States.

Thoughts on national service:

I certainly recommend the Peace Corps. But I also see tremendous value in service within the United States. In view of our current political crises, it would be useful if more Americans learned that, despite our differences in upbringing, resources, religion, education, and politics, we are all human. And we can be friends.

As I write this, both Republicans and Democrats are appealing to patriotism. But the views of what constitutes patriotism are often quite different. While part of me doesn't like the idea of requiring national service, another part of me believes that if everyone served, it would help us reach a more common understanding of patriotism.