

Philippines with the Urban Angels. This time, the two ran the eyeglasses area, which was very busy since most Filipinos don't have hats or sunglasses to protect their eyes. Over the course of two weeks, the volunteers gave away 10,000 pairs of reading glasses, as well as frames to the near-sighted patients. Glasses frames are very expensive in the Philippines but patients can have lenses made for only \$6 (Canadian).

The days fell into the same pattern of arriving in a new community, setting up the clinic, seeing patients all day, then taking the clinic apart and moving on. Being a veteran member of the mission, Fernandes didn't experience the same culture shock she did in her first year, although she did get emotional when she saw her first patient on the first day: a young boy named Christian who is blind in one eye.

"He was my first cry," Fernandes says. "I had far less cries this year."

In early February of this year, shortly before the Urban Angels group was due to leave for the Philippines, an earthquake rocked the country. After two weeks of mission work, Sarah and Trish stayed for an extra week to visit the earthquake zone. As they traveled deeper into the affected region, the destruction got worse. Homes, schools and buildings were destroyed and many families were living in tent communities set up in schoolyards and other open spaces.

While driving through the region, Fernandes saw a dump truck of boxes being unloaded. Those very same boxes had been sitting in her garage months earlier and were full of donations from friends, family and members of the Halton Hills community.

"I recognized by husband's and my daughter's writing on the boxes," she recalls. "Seeing my family's handwriting on those boxes and knowing that the stuff had arrived was just unbelievable."

Fernandes arrived back in Canada on March 10 and is already planning for next year's mission, where she will be joined by her husband. She can't wait to introduce him to all the people she has met along the way and to show him first-hand why she has fallen in love with international medical outreach.

"Selfishly, it enriches me so much as a person. I've loved the experience and the friends I've made there," Fernandes says. "I know my passion isn't everybody else's, but I think we have an obligation to leave the world a little bit better than what we came into."

For more information on St. Michael's Hospital Urban Angels Philippines Mission, visit www.urban-angels.org.



This is one of some of the boxes we dropped off in the earthquake area. The boxes with the faucets on them all came from our garage. You can see the writing on the top of this one.



"Here is one of my sister and I riding in a pedicab (one form of transportation) after one of our mission days," Sarah Fernandes explains.

Holy Cross partners with Philippines school

After her first mission to the Philippines in 2011, Sarah Fernandes asked a Filipino friend to find a school in the country that would be interested in partnering with a Georgetown school. Her friend found a school in the town of La Castellana and a partnership was born between Biaknabato Elementary School in the Philippines and Georgetown's Holy Cross Elementary School.

Fernandes and her sister, Trish, visited the Filipino school earlier this year and met the students and staff. After a long trip in a bus crammed with 150 people, the sisters arrived to an enthusiastic welcome. As they sat in the principal's office, little eyes peered through the windows, trying to get a glimpse of the foreign visitors. Sarah and Trish visited all the classrooms and were greeted in every room with a hearty "Welcome visitors!"

Some sights at the school were surprising: there are 50 to 66 kids in each class, two or three students sharing one textbook, and their toys are twigs, rocks and bottle caps. But what Fernandes took away from the experience was how similar the Filipino and Georgetown schools are.

"They have inspirational quotes on the wall just like Holy Cross," she says. "The students have best friends just like the students at Holy Cross."

Fernandes took a series of pictures and put together a slideshow to show the Holy Cross students the school they had adopted in the Philippines.

"I wanted (the Holy Cross students) to really understand how (the Filipino kids) are the same but different," Fernandes says. "They are similar in many ways, but born to different opportunities."

Throughout the year, Holy Cross students and teachers will be collecting school supplies and toys to donate to their friends at Biaknabato Elementary School. Fernandes will visit the school again next year and hopes to have pictures of the Georgetown donations in the Filipino school.

For more information on the Holy Cross-Biaknabato partnership and to find out how you can help, email Sarah at psfernandes@sympatico.ca. To see the slideshow, visit <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wyuX66XR0qA>.



"...and finally one of us under the school sign with some teachers, the principal, some of our friends and some students. In this particular shot, the principal is beside me, there are three teachers beside her, my sister, and then a few of our friends beside her including the friend who found the school for us," Sarah describes.