

Face to face with poverty



Jeffrey Arriola of St. Elizabeth Catholic High School is surrounded by youngsters on a cultural exchange to the Philippines.

Thornhill students see a different world on exchange

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Lianne Alierno will likely never forget feeling the clinging arms and looking into the vacant eyes of the destitute child.

At the very least, Beverly — a nine-year-old whose parents eke out a meagre living in the markets of the Philippines — is someone the Thornhill resident won't forget anytime soon.

Alierno, a Grade 12 student at St. Elizabeth Catholic High School, is one of 26 area residents who recently embarked on an exchange trip to the Philippines.

'Each one of us had 10 children hanging off our arms.'

The trip, organized by school officials and likely the first of its kind for York Region, gave participants a hands-on exploration into the life of ordinary Filipinos: the meals they typically eat, the smells they typically smell.

The tourists saw the most opulent sites the southeast Asian country has to offer, including a presidential residence and military academy.

But Alierno will find it hard to shake the sight of Beverly, among dozens of needy kids in Naga City, one of the Third World nation's poorest centres.

"Each one of us had 10 children hanging off our arms," the 16-year-old Alierno recalled. "Beverly just

kind of stuck with me afterwards. When one of my girlfriends would come to me, she would send them away."

Beverly's parents try to earn a living by selling handicrafts. They're happy, Alierno said, to make \$2 for a sweater that would ordinarily cost \$30.

Located in the southwest Pacific and home to 76 million people, the Philippines is largely an agricultural society.

It boasts considerable natural resources and a growing industrial sector. The average monthly income ranges from about \$215 to \$350, enough to earn most Filipinos a decent life.

But with inflation and unemployment officially hovering around 10 per cent and real growth rates stagnating, the economy of the country is unsettled — just like its political history, which is filled with guerilla warfare and civil unrest.

Removed from their country's centuries-long colonial past, children do various things to occupy the time in Naga, about 250 kilometres south of Manila, the capital.

Some play basketball. Others stay with the Missionaries of the Poor, a Catholic organization dedicated to helping the underprivileged get off the streets.

Observers say the missionaries do the best they can but need more help from the government.

Many Filipinos live in shanty towns next to garbage dumps. One such area in Manila created international headlines when it collapsed during the July trip, killing



One's happiness doesn't depend on what one has, one of the students learned from the youngsters she encountered on a cultural exchange.

more than 100 squatters.

Most shanty towns are 15-minute car rides away from affluent places such as Baguio City, providing a stark contrast between rich and poor.

The visitors spent most of their time in the city, about 250 km north of Manila. They discovered life is indeed different in Baguio's relatively wealthy neighbourhoods.

Though few of them have garages, large houses there line residential roads. Residents, many of whom are professionals, enjoy most basic necessities.

Observers say Vaughan is the Canadian urban area most resembling Baguio City.

In 1997, officials with both cities signed a friendship agreement.

Erlinda Insigne, who helped organize the trip, approached school board and Vaughan officials. They eventually agreed Filipino students at St. Elizabeth should explore the culture and education system of their homeland.

Insigne, who is president of the Filipino-Canadian Association of Vaughan, said the trip achieved its goals.

"Our students didn't have a clue about the Philippines' education system," she noted.

Students, she added, saw how "backward" the country is: the children use books more than 30 years

old and few have access to computers. The average school has 3,000 students and the student-teacher ratio is 40 to one at the secondary level.

St. Elizabeth principal Mary Cosentino, who also went on the trip, echoed Insigne's comments.

"Many of the students we took wanted to see more. They wanted to spend more time in the missionary," she said.

Organizers believe no school group from York Region had ever visited the Philippines.

Car trips between cities there are very long and Cosentino said no one could find a company that offers school trips to the country. Participants had to shell out nearly \$2,000 each and raise tens of thousands more to pay for the trip.

They say it was well worth the effort.

One of the benefits was the joy of handing giant containers filled with school supplies and other goods to the poor. For Alierno and other local students, the things they took from the trip were equally important.

She learned one's happiness does not depend on what one has. Alierno said she was struck by how spiritually fulfilled many Filipinos are, despite their poverty.

"When they say their responses at mass, they say them so loud and mean it. Over here, everyone just mumbles the answers," she said.

Local residents hope to raise money to bring Baguio City students to Vaughan next May.