



assumption volunteer news

building bridges across cultural, national and other divides



Seen on a road bridge in Iloilo, Philippines

“It pains me to hear this earth
called a land of exile.
I consider it a place of glory
for God...”

St Marie Eugenie

It's all about creating...—Rebecca Ickes

Rebecca is a graduate in art and design from Chicago, and has a passion for art and social justice. After 8 months in Kids Kabin she writes:

Approximately eight months ago I arrived in England to begin my year as a volunteer with the ALVP program in Newcastle-upon-Tyne. Where those eight months have gone I'm not quite sure but the saying "time flies when you are having fun" comes to mind. While living in an impoverished neighborhood has its challenges, I have been overwhelmingly blessed throughout this entire year. I signed on to the ALVP program (AMA as it's called in the States) because of the desire to work at Kids Kabin, an after-school arts center for 8-12 year olds. Having earned a Bachelor's degree in art, I was very excited to put that knowledge to some good practical use. Eight months later, my work has been all that I've expected and more.

Of course there are plenty of days when I cannot even dream up a reason why the kids are acting the way they sometimes do; however I consider myself immensely lucky to have the privilege of coming back to our flat each day with clay on my jeans, calluses on my palms or paint staining my fingers from doing the work I love to do. While my degree had a focus in graphic design, placing me in front of the computer for hours on end, my time at Kids Kabin has shown me how much more happy I am when working with my hands. It's because of my experience here that I now know more than ever what kind of career I want to try and make for myself upon my return back to the States. It is my hope that I will somehow manage to find a job in Chicago where I can continue working as a visual artist with at-risk communities. Being shown that there is a way for me to unite my two largest passions, art and social justice, has been a true inspiration.

Looking at this brief paragraph, this seems like a very short reflection for being in another country for eight months. I could of course elaborate on the ups and downs of being abroad, on the days I question my

motives for this year of service (which usually occur after returning from some bit of travel around Europe), or on the days where my roommate and I prefer to just sit inside our lovely flat all day because of the extreme lack of things to do in our neighborhood. I could try to describe to you the gross injustices I've learned of through my work with asylum seekers and refugees at a drop-in center called Common Ground or of the shocking vocabulary used by 10 year-olds because it is what they've heard by adults in their life.

However, despite the threat of romanticizing this experience for all of you, on the whole my time here in the Walker neighborhood of Newcastle-upon-Tyne has been wonderful. Kids will be kids and their actions are simply reactions to the surroundings in which they are being brought up. I've managed to somehow have the immeasurable responsibility of possibly being a positive role model in their lives while at the same time being lucky enough to show them what I love to do.



J-Ar and Rebecca at Newcastle Quayside

Overall, this year has been about creating. Creating artwork I give to everyone, creating a safe and welcoming space for others to share their lives with mine, and creating surreal-feeling memories that will no doubt last me a lifetime.

A journey I will never forget—John Wigley

John Wigley has been with AMA in Iloilo since September. He works with disabled children and with the Philippines



Blind Union which he writes about below:

What a journey! It feels like 10 years since I first reported for duty unannounced at the Philippine Blind Union (PBU) massage center that first week of September. 'Hi! My name is John from the UK', I recall nervously declaring, 'what would you like me to do?' There was no response, well, not towards me anyway. I started to wonder if they even knew of my intentions; it turns out they didn't! Some thought I was a psychologist, others a government worker and later I found out that some even thought I was a lost tourist!

These first few weeks were tough, I tried to make myself useful but alone I was like a boat without a paddle. And then I met Melvin Braza. Melvin had been a sailor on a British ship before he lost his sight, he knew my language, culture and most importantly he understood my northern accent! He started to educate me on Ilongo culture, PBU sub-culture and the conflicts that existed between the fractured disabled groups of Iloilo. He spoke passionately of his dream to unite the disabled under an umbrella group, PUSHER for Christ, a group that would help guide the blind and disabled persons of Iloilo to church and church-based activities. Finally a direction! Melvin had set my mission and together we would try to make this dream come true.

Our first objective was to build a relationship with the Church. This was no easy task; in my estimation the Church (Jaro Cathedral) appeared suspicious of our group, conscious perhaps of failed

outreach attempts in the past or even of the status of the disabled as beggars within the compound of the Church. We agreed to sell their out-of-season Candelaria candles for them at optimum price from 5am to 8pm every Sunday. An astonishing 88% of all monies gained through our endeavors went back to the Church. This was a small price to pay for the change in perception we achieved; no longer were we seen as a burden or as beggars. As parishioners and clergy alike acknowledged us as active members of the church, we began to



John and Melvin

earn respect amongst our peers.

In October Melvin and I established several people to continue our work outside the Cathedral whilst we focused on the welfare of one abandoned blind child and the organization of International Disability Day on December 3. The event was a success. Over 200 disabled participants '*pushed*' in the name of PUSHER for Christ around Iloilo City spreading awareness of our group and showing the wider community how a blind person (the motion) can unite with a wheelchair person (the sight) to manoeuvre around the city and overcome difficulties. We believe it created a powerful image, one that can inspire all persons regardless of religion, nationality, language, disability, etc to unite to overcome our difficulties together.

The New Year brought new challenges. It became obvious to me a

change of regime was required if this group was to continue to progress. I confess one of my failings is that I tend to get too involved though I am aware my role is simply to serve; however I feel in this case proactive change was required. To cut a long story short, a coup ensued with a positive impact on the group. Since then our bank account has tripled, we have a better relationship with the clergy and all directors attend regular meetings.

However, the incident disappointed me; I learnt a lot about the people I worked with, about myself and about my role at PUSHER for Christ and I identified that I needed to change for the good of PUSHER for Christ and for future volunteers of this group. Armed with a fresh perspective on my role at PUSHER I took one step backwards as the new regime took control. They asked me to write letters, proposals, create files, etc and I duly obliged. When asked about financial matters I resisted the temptation to get involved. I was, and still am, desperate to learn from my early mistakes.

In February, Melvin suggested a crazy idea: 'I have had a calling' (in a dramatic style that only Melvin can fashion) 'I want to push from one parish to another for 40 days for the glory of God'. I couldn't digest his request at first. How can a 65 year-old man possibly imagine he can walk for 40 days pushing a wheelchair? And why would he want to? The significance



The start of the pilgrimage

struck me later; this journey was an opportunity to develop our relationship with God and inspire others with an act that only persons with Faith would dare dream to embark on. The pilgrimage started February 17th and finished March 28th. I can't possibly begin to explain the true meanings behind what happened during that 40 days, too difficult and too little paper! All I can say here is that it was a journey I will never forget and my privilege to walk amongst such fine men of God.

I have 2 months remaining before I return to England. I am sure there are still many challenges to overcome before then. The most significant to my heart is young Ricor, the abandoned blind and autistic child Melvin and I care



John and his young friend Ricor

for. Now he has recovered from his operation and can partially see I feel it is my duty to find him a permanent home. I do not want to abandon him also.

Working with PUSHER and, in particular, working with Melvin has made me a better man. I thank God for giving me this opportunity and pray that AMA will send others in my path so they too can experience Jesus in the people who have touched my life. Those who have known me before my PUSHER for Christ days know I was not a very committed Christian. I do not pretend to be so now. However my relationship with my God has improved immensely since September and I credit that to PUSHER; in particular, to my dear friend Melvin Braza. This group has given me the gift of simplicity and humility; they have opened my eyes to my shortfall in an affectionate way and praised me for my virtues. I strongly recommend AMA maintain and strengthen bonds with this disabled group.

If you would like to help John find a permanent home for his young friend you can contact him on e-mail: j.wolves@live.co.uk

Volunteer Updates

New Arrivals



Jannice, Helen and J-Ar

Jannice Reyes Amaro arrived on New Year's Day to volunteer in the Pendower Good Neighbour Project in Newcastle. She is placed with two local volunteers, Lee and Craig, and will be joined by Aimee Zenit from the Philippines in July.

Martin Vittek flew to Brazil on April 12, just before the volcanic ash cloud caused chaos in European skies. He spent 3 weeks with Anne McMahon in the Living and Learning project in Rio before making his way by bus – a journey of over 1000 miles—to his project in Cristino Castro, where he will work in the Development for All



Congratulations!

Tony Mulcahy (El Salvador 2001-02) has a new job with Drugline UK as the HIV Coordinator in Preston

Marites Villaram (Hengrave 2004-05) married Ian Hamilton on May 8 in Kilkenny. She has been working at L'Arche for over two years and many of the residents were there to share in her happiness.

Update on Ricor

John has been working to find Ricor an institution in Manila where he can be properly looked after and go to school. He has applied to a foundation which takes care of street children and where we have previously placed ALVP volunteers. Once accepted in this or another place, John wants to fly him there with a care-giver. He estimates it will cost about 20,000 pesos (£350). If you would like to help, contact John direct at

j.wolves@live.co.uk

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assumption
volunteer
programme

Contact:
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W8 5HN

alvpcoordinator@hotmail.co.uk

www.alvp.org.uk

The Assumption Volunteer Programme provides an opportunity for young people over 20 to take up the challenge of living in a culture that is very different to their own and to share in the lives of the poor, the young and the marginalised with Assumption communities around the world.

It is for those with a sense of personal search and an openness to unfamiliar ways of living and working, ways that value people for who they are not what they do.

Assumption Volunteers, wherever they may be... the Philippines... the UK... Africa... Brazil... are engaged in:

- ◇ *Education (either in a formal or informal setting)*
- ◇ *Working to empower the poor, the young and the marginalised*
- ◇ *Building up the human family and bridging cultural, national and other divides*

Changes in Kensington Square



In February 2009 the Sisters of the Assumption sold most of the Kensington Square site to the Jesuits for Heythrop College. Sr Cathy Jones writes about what has been happening since then.

The past year has been one of many changes for the Religious of the Assumption based in Kensington Square.

No. 20 Kensington Square, which was formerly rented out to students, has been substantially renovated and is now the community house for the 9 sisters who are based in the Kensington community.

They are delighted with the changes that have been made to make the house suitable for a religious community and are happily settling into their new home, with its beautiful views of the Kensington Square gardens.

Many of you will know the former convent, still owned by the sisters, which continues to be used for offices and for welcome visiting sisters and groups. Over the summer there will be a return of workmen, both to make the former convent more suitable for visitors, and to work on the chapel.

We hope that there will be an opportunity to welcome you to see the changes that have been made for yourself!

For the time being, apart from the house number, the address remains the same as before:

Convent of the Assumption, 20 Kensington Square,
London W8 5HN

International Week in Lourdes for Young Adults 16/17—25 July 2010

Isabel Hill volunteered in Hengrave before becoming a novice with the Assumption Sisters. Now in Lourdes, she wonders if any returned ALVP volunteers might be interested in this



It's a week of service, prayer, and activities at Lourdes, open to 18-30 year olds from all over Europe. We have a good number signed up from various countries, but because I am enthusiastic about it, I'm trying to spread the word in England too. One of the main languages used will be English (we will translate everything as we go along).

The theme is "To see or not to see", based on the apparitions to St Bernadette, but done in a way which is really applicable to young Christians today. On mornings there will be service - helping at the baths or in the hospitals which provide accommodation for sick pilgrims. The afternoons and evenings are varied - every day has prayer times and there are also specific things like a walk to Bartrès where Bernadette spent part of her childhood, an excursion (I hope to the mountains!), a celebration of reconciliation, a visit to the "Cenacolo" community for recovering drug addicts, participation in some of the worship of Lourdes (candlelit procession, for example), etc.

The cost is £300, which includes full board and accommodation and all the activities, but not transport to Lourdes. We are hoping to fundraise so as to be able to offer financial assistance, at least for the transport for anybody who can't cover the cost. The closing date for applications (or at least for expressions of interest) is 1st June....

If you are interested contact Helen at the address above for the poster.