

John's Blog on his first visit to the Philippines as ASCT Charity Manager

To all our Sponsors and friends, I visited our projects in Manila for the first time as the Charity Manager of ASCT, below and over the next few days are my blogs from the Philippines. I was there for 8 days and the blogs describe my feelings each day.....

I wish I could put into words the emotions I have felt on my first day, I'm not intelligent enough nor could I do it justice, but please spend a minute to read these words, they are from my heart.



31/01/16

Day 1.

As the plane started its decent along the coastline of Manila I began to wonder what would face me, I had heard so much about the Philippines from previous visitors. I could see from the aircraft window, miles of small tin roofs that stretched as far as the eye could see along the Philippine coastline. As the aircraft turned on finals and we got ever closer to the airport I could see what only could be described as blocks of corrugated iron sheets placed one on top of another with people scurrying about their everyday business The scale was immense and shocking .



Once I had cleared customs I was met outside by Peter the Director of ASCF. We started our journey to Mango driving on roads that were filled with every mode of transport that you could imagine and most of them totally illegal in the UK. My first impressions of the metropolis buildings as we drove past were how dirty they looked, but then again we were in central Manila and pollution would be high, every now and then you would see little alleyways with scores of children and their parents sitting on their haunches sorting out rubbish. I thought of my children and couldn't imagine them sitting sorting through our black rubbish sacks let alone someone else's. Peter was explaining the economics of the Philippines but I'm sorry to say the view outside took my attention, as the journey unfolded and we reached the suburbs of the Capital, more and more shantytowns appeared, tin roof after tin roof, and children running around without a care in the world. The poverty was over whelming, I can't believe in 2016 that people still have to live this way, I wish I could put into words the sick feeling I had inside, as I watched the children and adults sort through rubbish which to them was the everyday part of their lives, but to myself was disgusting, it reminded me of a conversation I had with someone at our golf club, when he said we had just as much poverty in the UK so he would only support them, I wish he could be here maybe just maybe he would feel different. I'm not sure how so many people live way below the poverty line and survive. We arrived at Mango house to be greeted by the children of ASCF, a crowd of smiling young faces that were genuinely pleased to see us, they crowded round all wanting to extend their greetings and treating us like a long lost family members. I was taken on a tour of Mango House by children that were proud of their home, to them this was luxury to me it was basic at best. I sat in their garden with smiling faces all around me; this was one big happy family. As the evening wore on I sat with the children while we ate, they had lain on a feast for us with rice and a freshly caught fish brought by Peters wife. I watched as the children shared their food with each other, never giving it a second thought. I was told the story of a young girl who was almost feral when she came to ASCF almost two years ago, she would gorge her food in seconds and then try to eat the other children's food as though it was her last meal, from where she came from it could have been, now this young girl was sitting in front of me sharing her food with others. How humbling this was for me, a lesson learnt of hope even when all appears lost. 9pm off to bed, really looking forward to my second day which I'm sure will bring many different emotions

Sorry to bore all my friends with this ongoing blog, but it helps me process what I am seeing each day and give me some sense of normality.

Day 2

1st of February 2016

I got to sleep eventually at about 10.30pm after having to move to the office and sleep on a sofa after a leak in the roof saturated my mattress in my bedroom. At 4am I hear some of the children getting up and ready for school, somehow I can't imagine my children getting up at that time for anything let alone going to school. At 5am I take a shower, it's a cold one though, as the funds won't stretch to hot water just yet, but at least I only have to do it for a week, unlike those I will leave behind. Once dressed, I am greeted by smiling faces and warm welcomes. Some of the children go about their daily tasks of cleaning the Mango house before they get the transport to school. We had a staff meeting this morning to get to know Mango staff and the work that they do. It's hard to describe the feeling of family and love for one and other that you experience in Mango house. maybe the saying from adversity comes greatness is true. At 1pm we leave Mango Tree house to visit the Wowtoda Dam, maybe our brains are so conditioned to our natural environment that we are shocked when we are no longer in our comfort zone, every time I leave the compound I can't take in the scale of poverty that surrounds me, I had that sick feeling again and a longing to return home to block out what I am witnessing. As we arrived at the Dam, the scenery from 15 feet and above is stunning, it's what's below that 15 feet that is hard to comprehend, I don't even know if I can describe them as somewhere that humans could live, there are no words such as house, dwelling, abode, these are just dirty bamboo constructions that these people have to call home, no electricity, no running water, even seeing it is hard to describe let alone reading about it.

We walked for about a mile and every inch of the trail was filled either side with these slums. I couldn't wait to leave, the stench, the feeling just left me cold. If the Dam was anywhere else in the world it would be a tourist attraction, it will never be that here.



On our return to Mango house, all 46 of the children were in the lounge, they wanted to sing for us as a mark of respect. I've added a short video of the children at the end of this blog. It was lovely to see and hear, it also helped me forget what I had witnessed that afternoon. 9pm and off to bed, it's the sofa again for me as the leak can't be fixed yet. I am going to visit the school at the bottom of the rubbish tip tomorrow, where most of our Grapevine students go to study, then we are going to their shanty town to meet their parents, who are mainly rubbish tip scavengers or worse case scenario the father is dead and there is no income coming in, I really am not looking forward to it. I'll blog again tomorrow night about my 3rd day's experience

Blog Day 3,
2nd of February

I'm not to sure how to start this one, I still have the taste of the stench in my mouth from my visit to Payatas, this is a 50-acre landfill which earns it the name "second Smokey mountain' where hundreds of scavengers lost their lives in 2000 after a landslide from the tip This is where our Grapevine students are living, in shacks at the foot of this giant rubbish tip. I had been warned as to what I might experience, but never in my worse nightmares could I have been prepared for what I witnessed,

I woke at 3.30 this morning to the sound of a dog choir; hard as I tried I couldn't get back to sleep with the thought of what lay ahead. Although It was business as usual at Mango Tree house, the children woke between 4am and 5am went about their cleaning chores before sitting down to breakfast. They do this with the biggest smile on their faces, it's a pleasure to be around them. At 8.15am I was driven to Payatas with the ASCF senior social worker to visit the homes of 12 of our Grapevine students, in a nutshell, the Grapevine project offers extended family care and educational support to children whose financial situation means that they would have to work scavenging on the tip rather than attend school.

As we arrived at the first and again I'm not sure what to call it, as without seeing for yourself where and how they live it's hard to describe' I can only say it is the size of a small utility room minus any sanitation, flooring, cooking area, the front door consisted of the carcass of a rusted sprung mattress without the stuffing, there were no real windows except huge gaps in the tin roof and walls that just enhanced the smell from the rubbish tip. If you could picture that then you would be a quarter of the way of imagining this nightmare in front of me, and it housed up to 6 people, (the student was there and to my surprise she was immaculately turned out in her school uniform which had been brought with the money from her sponsor. Like all of the scavenging people they are very proud but without an education they have no chance of employment. In all the homes I visited I was offered hospitality which is remarkable seeing as the average income per day is around 80p a day. I feel bad but I refused as I'm not sure if my stomach could have taken it.



I had hoped that this home was a one off, but unfortunately the remaining 11 were very similar in one degree or another. I think that the Social worker had saved the worse to last for me, (the attached pictures can't do justice to what I saw and smelt) I had to cross an old wooden bridge which contained a running open cess pit stream where I think everything including human waste gathered. I was gagging as the smell hit the back of my throat, I even tried to hold my breath, but when I had to inhale it made me gag even more. I have never felt so ill from a smell, and these poor people have to live there 24/7. We thankfully returned to the sanctuary of Mango Tree house at around 5pm where I headed straight for a cold shower, my skin is still crawling with the smell of the tip. I'll be trying to have an early night tonight, hopefully to get rid of this horrible taste

Blog day 4

3rd February

Today was easier on the senses with a visit to ASCF Cashew School, which is situated among the shantytown houses in Payatas

Cashew Tree School, opened in 1998, and provides schooling for nearly 200 four to six year olds. It is within 200 yards of the rubbish dump.



This purpose built School runs classes for the poorest children from the most disadvantaged families who exist solely by scavenging through rubbish for anything of value.

The School gives the children the best possible start to their educational life. Class sizes are just 30 in size; the children are taught a well structured curriculum by qualified teachers.

My day started as normal, up at 4am, usual cold shower and then watched the children complete their tasks. Today we were to spend the day with a visit to the pre school children. We drove towards Payatas just as the heavens opened, instantly you could smell the stench, I'm glad it didn't rain yesterday as I'm sure I wouldn't of been able to stand the smell during the Grapevine visits. When we got to the school, the young children were preparing a show for us, they welcomed us with smiling faces albeit a few were asleep on their desks, (I suppose that's what happens when 6+ of your family are trying to sleep in a 2mtr X 2mtr shack) The day was fantastic though, you just want to scoop them all up and bring them home. Not a lot else to report today, but tomorrow maybe a different story, I'm going to visit more Grapevine families, this time the other side of the dump

Blog Day 5

4th February 2016

Only 2 days left in Manila so only a few more blogs to put up with..... It's strange that a pattern has formed from day 1, I have witnessed the cause and its effects, the solution and on my last day it will end in the result for these wonderful children as they are putting on a play and I will get chance to speak to ex students who have gone on to be successful and escaped the poverty trap they were in. It would be wrong of me not to mention the wonderful staff of ASCF and the love, support and encouragement they give to each and every child in their care.

Usual start to the day, except I had a lay in till 5am, today we were going to visit a Grapevine student at Tagumpay Elementary School, we arrived just after 9am, it was a lovely clean building, with children running about in their smart uniforms, it was so out of place to the rest of the surroundings.

We were introduced to the Principal, Lolita Cruz, you could tell just by talking to her that she ran a successful school. I thought we were just going to visit, have a look at a few classes and leave, but the Principal informed us that the school had laid on a welcome from the pupils which would be held outside. We were led to a stage area, where we were given front row seats, and behind us sat hundreds of children; I know what Royalty feels like now when they visit other countries. We were welcomed publicly by the Principal and then greeted by the children, the Philippine children have such a courteous way of greeting adults, they take your hand and place it to their foreheads as a sign of respect, this has happened at all the places I have been, by all the children....I have such respect for this nation. After listening to the children sing their national anthem and I might add everyone of them new it and sang their little hearts out. First on stage were the most amazing choir from the school, I have added a video of this at the end, as it sent shivers down my spine. We were then treated to a dance by three little girls, it was explained that the origin was from the North of the country. It was a fantastic show and totally unexpected. After this we went to the classroom where our Grapevine student and her classmates were receiving an English lesson. I wish I had been taught the way this teacher taught, I even learnt about nouns and pronouns, something Mr Rankin at my old school, never managed to teach me, and who said you can't teach old dogs new tricks! After the class we went back to the Principals office where we had refreshments prior to leaving. Then on to see more of our Grapevine students and families who had been rehoused to another part of Payatas where purpose built concrete rooms had been built, note I say rooms not houses. What a contrast to the tin roofed shantytown homes I had been to, there was no smell of rotting whatever it was I smelt before. Don't get me wrong these families are equally as poor, when you realise that the main bread winner earns 70p a day to feed his family by riding a pedal cycle taxi. They would of been scavengers before when they lived by the dump but after being rehoused it was to far to travel to carry out that work. I was told many of the families who had been rehoused, left after a short time and returned to shantytown so the could scavenge as it paid just a little more. There was one family of ours who had been rehoused, that now waked to the dump everyday to scavenge and it took about an hour there and an hour back just to earn an extra 30p. They left their children at



home the youngest being 3. No such thing as child protection here.

I returned to my safe haven, Mango tree house, where as always I was greeted like family by all 46 children, what a great feeling.

I'm off to an orphanage tomorrow where a number of our children started life, not sure I'm looking forward to this sort of heartbreak.

Blog day 6
5th February 2016

Well I didn't think it could be any worse or as bad as it was when I visited the Shantytown, but it was, I thought we were just going to visit an orphanage, but it turns out we were going to see the mother of one of our students who is a scavenger in Metro Manila, please read on for this horrific story and pictures.

One more day to go which means just one more blog for you to have to put up with, hopefully tomorrows will be happy.

As usual normal start to the day, up at 4.30, cold shower and meet the happy children doing their house chores. 9am we leave for the orphanage in Manila, I had no concerns at this stage as it would be normal for the social worker to come along and also a 11 year old Mango student who I thought had been at this orphanage before coming to Mango. We spent only a short time looking around the orphanage and then I was told that we were going to visit this child's mother at a shantytown in Manila. I was then told the story behind this child and how he came to be referred to ASCF and Mango Tree House. The child was one of 3 siblings, the other two being girls, the mother and father worked as scavengers on a local dump. The father, who is now serving a jail sentence, constantly abused the child, in what way I'm not sure and to be honest I'd rather not know.

On the way to the Shantytown, Peter the director of ASCF made a call to a number of people who he said would ensure our safety whilst we were out of the vehicle. On our arrival we were met by a number of men who walked in front, behind and at the side of us, we were led through an alleyway with crowded blocks of concrete shacks either side, stretching up 3 or 4 story's, to say I felt intimidated was an understatement. We were led up some concrete stairs where you could see below a river of garbage and excrement with rats running around it, we went along a passage way where men and women were just sitting on their haunches cooking fish on open type fires. We went into a room where Peter introduced us to a man whom he said was 'respected' in the community and that we would be quite safe when we went into the shantytown where this boy's mother stayed. I was hoping she



lived in this room and I could get out of this place as soon as possible.

After about 10 minutes Peter told us it was time to go, I reluctantly followed and again we were escorted by a number of people which now included two women, we walked out of the concrete jungle alleyway and then across a road which can only be described as Manilas answer to the M25, you had to be there to understand just how dangerous it was to cross 8 lanes of traffic with juggernauts bearing down on you..... As we entered the shantytown, it was like déjà vu, the smell, the poverty was as bad if not worse than I had experienced before. We were led through stagnant walk ways with hundreds of eyes following us, Peter told me to give one of my minders my video case for safe keeping, I was only to happy to oblige. We eventually reached the place where the mother of the child lived with her two daughters, I was told she was a night scavenger, as during the day it was to expensive to get admittance to the dump (10p) when our student saw his mother and siblings you could see the pain in his eyes, it was so sad to see, words can't describe how I felt as I watched them embrace, I was close to tears.

The mother wanted to show us where she lived, it is beyond horrendous, we wouldn't even put a dog in an area like this, judge for yourselves in the pictures, it's like a kennel, add a temperature of 35 degrees, throw in nearly 100% humidity and the smell from a thousand untreated sewage farms and you'll get a good idea. The mother was so grateful that we had taken her son and that

he was receiving everything that she couldn't provide safety, food and education. She knew it was only possible because of the child's English sponsor and the loving support of the staff from ASCF.



When it was time to go, I have never been so glad to leave an area, for two reasons, our safety and the smell. This place was a breeding ground for every disease you can imagine.

Once again I was so pleased to return to Mango Tree House, a cold shower and change of clothes. Today will remain in my memory for life; it is not something I would wish on my worst enemy, it's barbaric that any government can allow its people to live this way.

None of us should ever moan about what we don't have and what we want, if you do, come and visit the Shantytowns of Manila, you will soon realise how rich your life is

Blog day 7

6th February 2016

Well this is my last day in the Philippines and last blog from here at Mango, today was a brilliant day, spending time with the children and watching a pantomime of Snow White and the 11 Dwarfs, performed by the Children of Mango Tree House.

Thank you to my wife, all my family and friends for joining me on this journey, I hope that my blogs have given you an insight into the children of the dump - Manila and that you will think of them from time to time when you are feeling low, it has been unbelievable journey for me and one that will remain in my heart for a life time.

My last post will be Sunday when I return to Kuala Lumpur and I have processed my time. I'm grateful that a number of people have asked how they can help support the Charity, so I will post details tomorrow.

Many thanks to you all

John x

Normal start to the day, up at 5am, I didn't sleep well last night, I couldn't get the image of the home we visited yesterday out of my mind, I was thinking about it, we wouldn't even let a dog sleep in those conditions and yet a mother sleeps in a space of 6' X 4' with her two daughters. I felt sad, as she had asked our social worker if we would take her eldest daughter as well to live at Mango. Just heartbreaking.

Anyway I digress, up at 5am, I was first to rise today as the children have a lay in till 6am. They complete their chores as usual but with a little more to do at the weekend. Then we all had breakfast, there was a buzz around the place as tonight the children would be performing a pantomime for us and 200 other people. They had decided in our honour to perform their Christmas play and had invited their friends and family. The staff at Mango were running about all day getting the stage set up, costumes ironed and making sure everything was in its place, including making food on an industrial scale for all the guests.

I spent most of the day playing basketball, football and table tennis with the children; it was great to spend quality time with these wonderful people. I say wonderful and truly mean it, every one of them you see in the pictures I post will have a harrowing story to tell, stories that you and I would shudder to hear and also to believe, but yet here they are with smiles on their faces and belief in their hearts. As it neared 6pm, we were called to the stage area to take our seats, the children dressed in their pantomime costumes came and gave us all huge hugs. Then on with the show, it was fantastic, I was so proud of them, the singing, the dancing and the acting was first class, not

bad for children who had faced so much adversity in their short lives. At the end of the performance, it was back to Mango Tree House, where the children laughed and smiled as they talked about their play. One little girl's father had come to the play and when he went to leave she sobbed her eyes out, she couldn't be comforted and wanted to go back with her dad. I had a lump in my throat as I saw the distress this child was in, just 11 years of age and so much pain in her little heart. The staff at Mango were incredible, they agreed with the father that he could take her home for the night and a staff member would pick her up tomorrow, the staff are so dedicated, as one told me, she could earn more money by working elsewhere, and had intended to spend just one year at Mango, that was 14 years ago, it's goes to show the affect these children have on you.



As the children drifted off to bed, each one came up to say good night and ask me to stay longer, they call you uncle or auntie as a sign of respect and acceptance as a family member. Some were in tears at my leaving, I must admit I had to fight them back myself. I'm dreading tomorrow, as I will feel I'm leaving behind my children, such is the love that has been shown to me. Each child has their own unique personality, but the one thing they all have in common is the love they give freely. I will miss them so much, in the words of our Chairman Kay, I've been well and truly Mango'ed.....John

Blog day 8

7th February 2016

Well this is well and truly my last Blog of my trip to Manila in the Philippines to visit our charity projects, I left this morning to fly to Kuala Lumpur to spend a few days with my sister in law before returning to the UK. I leave with mixed emotions, I will be sad to leave the wonderful children, which through no fault of their own have been born into poverty beyond anything you or I could comprehend or imagine.

The untiring dedication of the staff of ASCF and their love for the children of this I will always remember.

The joy to wake up each morning and always be greeted with smiling faces.

I'm still not sure that my brain was able to process fully what I saw and experienced over the last 8 days.

I leave, knowing that I have to do everything possible to help change these young lives, albeit one at a time, if we can just break the cycle of poverty by ensuring each child in our care receives the best possible education, then maybe they can go on to find a reasonable paid job and move out of the shanty towns they live in and start their own family on an even footing. I promise you one thing it won't be through lack of trying on their behalf.

I have experienced in the last 8 days the most horrific living conditions and extreme poverty where one meal a day is a luxury for the Scavengers. Everything you see in the pictures I posted of the Shantytowns has been reclaimed from the dump, even at times, the food they eat including Pag-Pag (Google it, it's horrific)

When I came out here this was just my job, a Charity manager of a small Charity, working in an office in Camberley thousands of miles from Manila, one where most of the Sponsors are known personally, and trying to raise funds for children and families I didn't know. Now it's my mission to help in whatever way I can to better these young lives.

This without doubt has been life changing for me. It is so easy sitting at home in the UK, with our education system, NHS and the benefits that go with our country, it wasn't our fault that we were born in the UK, we are blessed, those children in the Philippines weren't so blessed.

I am looking forward to getting back to the UK, I've missed my wife and family, but I won't forget my time here or the people I leave behind, as my flight to KL left Manila and I looked down on those same tin shacks that I saw, in what seems a life time ago, but in reality was 7 days, I think I've learnt so much about the people of the Philippines, they are a proud nation, they are not looking for handouts, they want to work, but just need that leg up, like all of us have at sometime or another in our lives.

I then remembered as the Philippines disappeared behind me, they still have to endure the torture of being born a rubbish dump child 365 days of the year, until their time comes to escape the poverty.

I won't ever forget this humbling experience.

I would like to thank all my friends on Facebook for taking the time, firstly to read and comment on my blogs, and secondly to ask how they can help. It was never my intention that my blogs would be a fundraising exercise, but if anyone would like to sponsor a child, give a one off donation or just help raise funds through events it would be gratefully received. I have included the details below on how you can do any of these.

If you just want to be a friend of ASCT, (it's soon going to change its name to -)
Children of the Dump - Manila.

Transforming young lives through education

I will be happy to send you out the quarterly newsletter via email.

Thank to all my friends once again for your support, without your positive comments I'm not sure how I would of coped.

With best wishes

John x

If you feel you can support the children there are lots of different options. ASCT are really flexible as to what anyone can afford to give. If it's an individual or group of sponsors, every penny counts no matter how large or small the donation. Unlike many other charities, I can guarantee that 88p in every £ donated goes directly to helping the child

Cashew children, these are pre school children who ASCT run a a school for, thereby preparing the children between 4-6 years of age to enter school at 7 with a head start in their educational life. ASCT support over 200 children at a cost of around £10 a month that's less than 32p per day including a daily meal.

Grapevine students, of which there are 67, these are students who still live with their parents, many still in the shantytown who if not supported by ASCT would still be scavenging on the rubbish tip instead of attending school, it costs approximately £40 a month to support these children

Mango Tree House residential, it costs approximately £80 a month to house, feed and educates a child. There are 47 children who reside there, many of these children had been abandoned at an early age by their parents or their parents just couldn't afford to keep them. Why not get a group of you together to spread the cost of sponsoring a child

The key thing about sponsorship is the relationship created with the child.

See Nica May's video where she tells about the difference it has made for her (or see it on our website https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8RvXm90_iCA#t=74

You would receive communication from the child at differing intervals – from Cashew it is annual and from Grapevine and Mango they write to you every month or however often you write to them. The office here handles all communications so you are never giving your details directly to the child.

If you feel that you would want to sponsor a child please let me know and I will contact you with more information

We still have a lot of children without sponsors,

If you don't want the commitment of sponsoring an individual child, we welcome general donations, again please contact me.

Become a local ambassador – help to fundraise and gather support locally. Our main church and donor base is in Surrey and we really need to widen our net geographically and demographically. If you feel you can help us do that I would be so grateful and obviously here to help.

If you just want to receive updates via newsletters please let me know and I'll add you to the distribution list

Thank you all once again

John