

# Balitaan

## When Pandemic Strikes: An Evacuated PCV Story

*Rok Locksley first served as a PCV in the Republic of Moldova from 2005-2008. He then worked as a PC Recruiter from 2009-2016, then went back for a 2<sup>nd</sup> PC tour with his wife in the Philippines from 2018-2020. Rok is currently a PC Fellow at Western Illinois University. This is his evacuation story.*

“It’s not goodbye, it’s just until we see each other again.” Those are the last words I spoke to my counterpart in person earlier this year. I was 18 months into my 24 month Peace Corps service in the Philippines, about to board the last boat off of our island and begin the difficult return trip to the United States.

My counterpart-Nibarie “Ban2x” Nicolas-- had become my best friend since we met just before my swearing in ceremony. Ban2x (pronounced Ban-Ban) was mid-twenties, full of energy, curiosity, and a rare sort of infectious joy. Ban2x and I immediately bonded. We would practice paddling until sunset and after practice we would sit on the

beach and watch the stars slowly reclaim the sky as we talked. Our conversations would turn to memories and life lessons, comparing our experiences and life philosophies from different cultures and realities. In these long conversations against the background of lapping waves and a tapestry of sunsets – our deep friendship was forged. We ended each night with traditional goodbyes in Binisayan of “Kitakits” which isn’t so much goodbye as “Until we see each other again.”

Within six months I arranged for Ban2x to get his diving certifications so that we could dive in the marine sanctuary, as he had never really seen the preciousness of the resource he was protecting. When we surfaced after our first dive, I could see the wonder in his eyes, it was as if a new world had been unveiled to him and I knew then that he would work diligently to preserve these precious resources.

We had some great plans for 2020, but fate had a different route picked out for us. As January ended and news of COVID-19 began to become widespread in the Philippines, we intensified our work as if we somehow

subconsciously understood what was to come. We took more opportunities to spend time with each other. In March, I could see the writing on the wall, and I tried to wrap up my projects and spoke with Ban2x at length about what needed to happen professionally if we left. We never really spoke about the emotional side of it.

March hastened the pace of things and in the first week we went on lockdown and could not leave our house. I talked with Ban2x about an evacuation, but he was not worried. In true Filipino fashion, we laughed it off and made jokes; after all, Peace Corps had evacuated us in 2019 to Manila when a typhoon had come close to landing on our Island, but we returned a week later and continued our work and lives. But when we got the call for consolidation in mid-March, I knew that it would be the end of my service. I called Ban2x and asked him to come over to our house.

Ban2x arrived at our house in his usual chipper demeanor, when I explained that Peace Corps was consolidating us, he did not seem fazed. We talked for a while on the porch and then I brought him into the house and started pointing out things he could take and asking him to make sure that certain people and fisherfolk got other things. There was this moment after I had shown him our bicycles and asked him to take them where I saw it dawn on his face that we were leaving. My heart broke because in that moment I realized that not only was I leaving Peace Corps service early, but more importantly I was leaving my best friend. I realized that I was leaving a community that had accepted and welcomed me. I was leaving a language that was only spoken on my island, a whole way of life that could only be lived where I

was, and I was leaving family, friendships and all of the relationships that I had worked the past year and a half to build.

Ban2x showed up at our house early the next day, our last day on the island. He had brought his family car to shuttle us to the seaport. He knew we were on the last boat out and he wanted to make sure we got to the port safely. On the drive we made promises to stay in touch and to visit each other in that awkward way that you do when you have so much to say but lack the words or ability to properly express how much you value the other person. We got out of the car, I could see tears welling up in both our eyes and we hung around until the last possible minute. As I grabbed my dragon boat paddle and turned for one last look at my best friend, I said "It's not goodbye, just until we see each other again."

A boat carried us to a larger island where we met up with other PCVs. We managed to catch the last boat off of that island, and we sat there on the top deck of a ferry, rocking in the sea, surrounded by other tourists trying to figure out if they should stay or go, the thirty of us who looked shell-shocked and broken didn't have a choice to make. We didn't really talk. What was there to say?

About two hours into the five-hour ferry we all got an alert on our phones at the same time. The call went out; the director had declared evacuation of all PCVs. That is how we found out that our service was over. On a boat, rocking in the sea, clutching what random items we had shoved into our backpacks in the state of trauma of leaving our home. Thirty of us sat there. No one talked to each other. Some cried. Some tried to call their families. Some stared off into the

waves, trying to soak up the last of the Philippines. Most, like me, were simply in shock and desperately trying to figure out what to do next.

We could not go to my parent's house or my wife's parents. I knew that the evacuation route would take us through various airports, and I was sure I was getting exposed. The risk was not worth it to my family. My grandparent's house was out, my uncles and aunts had young kids. We literally had nowhere to go. Those few who I timidly reached out to made it gently clear that they did not want to risk that I might be bringing the virus coming from Southeast Asia. I understood. We had given up everything to join the Peace Corps. We had no house, car, job. We had nothing waiting back in the States for us except the terrifying horror of the unknown. Unknown if we had the virus, unknown where we would sleep when we landed, unknown where we could get health care or insurance or a job or food or winter clothes. Everything we owned was in a storage unit and I was not sure how I was going to make the next payment on it.

Thankfully, a fellow volunteer offered his family's summer cabin in the Midwest as a place of landing to us and a few others. We ended up living there in quarantine from March until June. Three months. Three months of trying to make sense of my world. Three months of writing resumes and filling out applications. Three months of zoom interviews and hopes. Three months of struggling alongside my fellow evacuees to find our new place in the pandemic world. I talked to Ban2x at least once a week. That helped a bit. In the EPCV cabin, we shared our struggle with each other and tried to help everyone process. I cannot imagine

what it was like for volunteers who had chosen the lonely hotel room option. Finally, after three months, just when the warmth of summer finally began, we started to get hired or accepted in our next lives. A few of us got into graduate school; I managed to get a Peace Corps Fellowship. The rest of us got federal jobs using NCE. Without the support of the RPCV network, NPCA's meetings and seminars, and Jodi Hammer, I don't think we would have made a good transition out of that cabin.

I have recently had a few RPCVs ask me what the hardest part about the evacuation was. The problem with the question is it makes it seem like it is over- but for me it is not. I am building a place that is starting to feel like home again, but the evacuation was not an easily packaged life event. It was trauma and I am still experiencing it, working through it, and processing it. Every time I talk to Ban2x I am filled with conflict about abandoning my work and my friends, and I am questioning if I should have stayed on my island (which has had less than 10 cases so far) or if I made the "right" choice to return to the US. I do not identify as an RPCV but rather as an EPCV because we all came back at the same time into an America that was not what we left. I have met a few people who have lost their homes due to fires or different life circumstances; people who have walked out of strange airports without any idea of what to do next; people who have relied on the charity and good will of others to survive. I know what that is like now. That is what it is like to have been evacuated during the pandemic, but it's too much to answer the RPCV's question. If I had the courage, I might let them know that the hardest part is that

we are still going through it. Some of us are still waiting to return to service.

For me, my friendship with Ban2x is the core of my service and that will always remain true. I will go back to the Philippines and paddle with my Dragonboat team. I will make it back to visit my host family and to see my friends and family there – but I don't know when. For now, after catching up with Ban2x and exchanging hopes for our futures, I can only say "Until we see each other again."

## **Team Ituloy Serves Scholars to Keep Learning On-Track**

*By: Hannah Catiis, Ituloy Member and Paul Aleckson, PCAFPD President*

With a pandemic raging through the Philippines, PCAFPD scholars continue to persevere. Fifty undergrads and seven graduate scholars started classes in August and September thanks to your support of the PCAFPD. Due to the pandemic, classes are 100% online. Even recent RPCVs may raise their eyebrows that the internet would be fast and widespread enough for our scholars to engage in distance learning, but only one scholarship winner deferred and expects to start college next year. That said, it has not always been easy for scholars to get online. A common theme in the scholars' essays last semester was the difficulty of finding and affording reliable internet service.

Our Ituloy team in Manila has been proactive in gathering information on what the scholars need to succeed. The team proposed offering up to P1,000/month for internet load and numerous scholars have taken up the offer and offered extreme

gratitude. Ian de la Pena reported "The biggest issue that I experienced is the poor internet connection in our area. Luckily, the foundation never let their scholars left behind during this time of crisis. They provided me a prepaid Wi-Fi so that I can utilize it in my online summer class."

In addition, a lack of hardware was holding back some scholars. Many scholars have laptops while others use their smartphones, but not all scholars had what they needed. Again, the Ituloy team surveyed all the scholars and recommended the PCAFPD technology grants of P1,000 for things like keyboards and headphones. Three scholars were given grants of P3,000 to buy smartphones. Jannah Mae Oniola was one of the three and she wrote, "Thank you very much (for the 3k grant), this is a huge help for us given the situation. To be honest, our classes are about to start and I don't know what (gadget) to use. My mother planned to borrow money from a friend tomorrow, but you just provided us with very good news, especially to Mama." The technology grants are helping scholars stay on track to graduate and we continue watching closely for any other needs.

Finally, we continue to make the Contributions to Living Expenses (CLE) for all our scholars. All are living for free at home because of the distance learning, but we had no intention of trimming the CLE because they were not living in dorms or boarding houses. Jonabel Hollon told us "it's not all bad because I've got the time to spend and bond with my family." Obviously, some of the CLE is going to help the entire family at a time when many are out of work. Once awarded a PCAFPD scholarship, a student becomes part of the PCAFPD family and if

our continued small contributions help the entire family during this pandemic, we think it is money well spent as our bright and determined scholars march toward graduation.

One of our new scholars this fall, Miguel Logronia, summed it up well, writing “I have received the reimbursement. From the bottom of my heart I would like to thank everyone from the PCAFPD FAMILY for the love and support you've given me this semester. I will do my best this semester and make you all proud, thank you for giving an example of what charity and love is all about. From my family, thank you.”

## **SCHOLAR ESSAYS 2<sup>ND</sup> SEMESTER 2019-20**

### **Enduring the struggles**

***Renz Marion F. Medice is pursuing a BS in Civil Engineering at the Technical University of the Philippines***

Undeniably, the pandemic has challenged the economy of several countries since most of the business establishments and many industrial firms have decided to stop and close their operations. Apparently, these past few months have been difficult and dispiriting – that the fear, sorrow, uncertainty and hardships of the pandemic have been compounded by the tragic reminders that – happened in many countries.

As for me, my life has been completely uprooted because of the virus. As soon as the nation-wide quarantine became a thing, my family experienced the struggles of providing foods and other necessities. Nevertheless, the virus and the sufferings

have not had the chance to hinder my eagerness to continue doing my school works and vocation. In fact, I was entrusted with the tough task of designing the structure and interior of our humble house. I was able to perform my academic learning hands-on: managing the workers, estimating the budget and properly consuming the time are just a few of those lessons learned. It is somehow a blessing in disguise for me because I was able to have the feeling of being in an On-the-Job Training since the university had our real OJT postponed.

Also, because of quarantine I had the time to hone my skills and talents. Thanks to my father who bought me a new guitar. I am now using my spare time to relieve my stress just by plucking the strings of my guitar.

I would like to mention Sir Wally Penilla. Thank you for reaching out and trying to help me. I really appreciate your support not just to my studies but also to my personal life. Sir! This is my last year in engineering. It wouldn't be possible without you, the PCAFPD and the FAS. It makes me teary realizing how near I am in getting the title "Engineer".

Indeed, this is far different from my previous semesters. It reminded me to become resourceful and brave as I endure the struggles of this arduous life. I thank God because none of us has experienced COVID 19. I thank Him for His blessings He gave us when we were in quarantine. I can somehow say these past months are not a waste of time but a productive one.

## **Finding a way to flourish**

***John Gil B. Bilolo is pursuing a BS in Electronics and Communication Engineering at the Universidad de Manila.***

Online learning or eLearning is the main form of education utilized by students and teachers in the past few months due to the ongoing COVID19 pandemic which limits physical interaction between people. This unorthodox method is a type of blended learning technique which uses the benefits of distance learning without doing away with the familiar interaction between students and teachers. This change in the teaching and learning strategy was a response to the challenges brought forth by the COVID19 pandemic.

Who would've thought that this pandemic will severely disrupt the lives of millions of people, cause economic downturn, and threaten academic freeze? While others would vote for academic freeze to ensure the safety and health of students, teachers and communities, it is equally important for us students to continue learning amidst these limitations. This is where technology swoops in to offer alternatives to the traditional learning system that we have. Online learning reduced the chances of spreading the virus amongst students and teachers alike without stopping the academic year. It has allowed classes to continue even when students and teachers are at home. It also allowed teachers to keep their jobs by having them teach remotely.

At first glance, it would appear that online learning is the perfect solution to our academic woes. While online learning did help me to continue with my studies, it has also posed some serious difficulties. I am one

of those lucky enough to have my own computer but I am certain that there are students who do not have the necessary equipment to conduct online learning at home. Further, connectivity issues are one problem that I face regularly. Staying online and updated is the heart and blood of online learning and if you are not always connected online, then you will surely miss important lessons. I try to be resourceful to go around this problem by going to computer shops or staying at a friend's house who has Wi-Fi connection. Another problem that I face is that some of our subjects are difficult for me to understand on my own, I mostly ask my friends or watch video tutorials to understand it better. My friends had been a huge help in getting through my summer classes and I would always be grateful. When this pandemic started, I thought I would be cut off from my friends and that I will surely miss spending time with them, but as it turns out, I have been more close to them and we have been working more closely together to understand our lessons, deepening our bond while making sure that we do not fall behind in our lessons.

This quarantine period taught me that we should stand in solidarity to survive this pandemic. It also taught me that despite challenges and restrictions, life will always find a way to continue and flourish.

## **Signing Off**

***Nheliean Lyka B. Ardiente graduated in 2020 with a BS in Secondary Education.***

To my dearest benefactor: Every challenge in our life is just an approbation in every decision we made. It simply gave us a lesson to become a better one. Sometimes we feel

that we can't make it, but then again, it is just a trial in order for us to make it better.

Another semester was just ended. Sad to say this is my last semester being a student but on the other hand, I am happy because I already surpass all the challenges that I encounter in my college journey. I am very thankful to the PEACE CORPS ALUMNI FOUNDATION FOR PHILIPPINE DEVELOPMENT because this foundation made my dreams possible. I can't get out through my day without thinking how this foundation mold me to become a better person and help me achieving all my dreams and goals in life. This last semester of mine taught me many lessons which I am able to use in my daily living. Practice teaching/internship is really hard, especially in dealing with the students behavior and capacities. In my course, Bachelor of Secondary Education is really tough and very challenging for me. We all know that every individual is unique and we need to learn those differences that they have. Even though it is a hard one, yet I am happy and contented when I know that my students really learn a lot from me. Teaching a student is just like raising your own children. It is not just teaching them about the subject but also you need to teach them good values in order for them to become a better individual. Being a student teacher gave me an idea of how difficult to teach students, but as days go by, I already appreciate the essence of teaching and I am now embracing it wholeheartedly. This is my last essay I guess but I am forever be grateful in this foundation. Without the PEACE CORPS ALUMNI FOUNDATION FOR PHILIPPINE DEVELOPEMENT I think I can't make this success through the end. I know words are not enough to thank this foundation and all the people behind this but then thank you so much. May our Almighty God give you all the courage and strength to continue helping

those students who are in need. Again thank you so much.

David M. Burns once quoted, "Aim for success not perfection. Never give up your right to be wrong, because then, you will lose the ability to learn new things and move forward with your life. Remember that fear always lurks behind perfectionism." This quote really inspires me to do everything that I can whether it will end up in a failure because failure only teach us a lesson in order to become a better one.

### **AMAZON SMILE FOR PCAFPD**

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1. Go to [smile.amazon.com](https://smile.amazon.com)
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At checkout, a portion of the purchase is automatically donated to PCAFPD. Don't let your purchase go unclaimed!

### **PCAFPD To Introduce Grant Program for 2021**

*By: Justin Tabor, PCAFPD Grants Manager*

The PCAFPD Board is very excited to introduce the start of a five-year pilot for a granting program entitled The PCAFPD Human Development Grant. After diligent and careful consideration, review, and revision the board approved the allocation of \$10,000 to be awarded in the form of

grants over the next five years, starting in 2021. Each year we will grant \$2000 worth of funding to selected projects. Applications can be submitted by an individual, or by a group. The purpose of the grant is to provide a flexible funding source for projects that fit within the following criteria:

- Enable training or additional educational purposes,
- Provide material resources (books, technology, etc.) which directly support academic endeavors,
- Allow scholars and academics to attend relevant symposiums or seminars,
- Obtain technical certifications or livelihood training,
- Facilitate projects undertaken under the supervision or support of a PCV or RPCV,
- Support other activities as approved by the Grants Manager and Board of Directors.

PCAFPD has a successful history of funding scholarships, and we plan to leverage that experience to provide continued support to human development beyond the tertiary classroom. Through this program we hope to increase Filipino access to different forms of education such as vocational offerings through TESDA, experiential learning through research, or continuing education through post-graduate opportunities. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic has forced many of our students into online classrooms, which require access to specific technologies. By offering a variety of funding opportunities in our initial pilot, we hope to learn more about market demands that we

can address through a more permanent commitment to granting.

Applications for the PCAFPD Human Development Grant will go live on the PCAFPD website in January 2021. We will be accepting applications until the summer, at which time selections will be made. Grantees will receive funding in late 2021.

In order to provide dedicated support and guidance to the start of the granting program the PCAFPD board also created a new board position, the Grants Manager. I am pleased to have been selected for this position, and will do my very best to make sure our granting program starts off on a positive footing, and put our funds to good use.

We want to thank our generous donors who have made this program possible. It is through your continued support that we have funds to support this endeavor. We also want to assure everyone that the granting program is intended to work as a compliment to the scholarship program. We do not envision grants replacing scholarships, and in fact are making steps to attract more scholars to apply for the scholarship program. You can look forward to more information throughout 2021.

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