

Photographs by At Maculangan



Angel of the City

**On a visit to the Philippines, British tourist JANE WALKER
discovers the squalid side of Manila and her own life's purpose.
By Sunshine Lichauco de Leon**

SOMETIMES THE LONG WAY TURNS OUT TO BE THE BEST path to get you to exactly where you need to go. That was how Jane Walker discovered her life's purpose thirteen years ago. A taxi driver took her, a British tourist newly arrived in Manila, by a dumpsite in Tondo in 1996, and there she saw horrific images that both haunted and inspired her.

Many people would close their eyes at the sight of children as young as three years collecting trash on the dumpsite where they live, but not Walker. She instead opened a door that would empower 100,000 children to envision a brighter future for themselves, one which would enable them to escape a life that, quite literally, knew only trash.

Initially her goal when she returned to London was to go back to the Philippines and build a day care center at the Tondo dumpsite where children aged three to five years could stay while their parents worked. But the reality of the bigger picture compelled Walker to aim for a longer-term solution. For the last fifty years, the children who lived in open garbage dumps had no other option but to spend their days collecting trash which their parents then sold as recyclable materials. In their squalid, densely populated shanty communities, they could not even dream of having the most basic needs. Walker recognized that education was the only way these families could escape the extreme poverty in which they were trapped, and so she turned her focus to building a school for them.

Having been traumatized herself by physical and sexual abuse as a child, she felt an immediate connection to the children she came in contact with at the dumpsite. "Maybe it was the haunting look in their eyes that reminded me of where I had come from," she says, "or the realization that their reality was a thousand times worse than mine, because even though I didn't finish high school I had enough education to pull myself out of the hole that others had put me in. These children had no way out. I remember thinking to myself that if I turned my back on them and did nothing, it would be like turning my back on myself." Walker felt a sense of responsibility to them, especially because there were no other charitable organizations working in the area.

She registered the Philippine Christian Fund (PCF) in Britain and the Philippines, and in 2003 opened the PCF school in Vitas, Tondo. Today the school provides elementary education to 450 children between the ages of four and seventeen and adult education to fifty out-of-school youth. The children are grouped according to ability rather than age. The teachers are trained to teach less by memorization and more interactively to allow the children to become critical thinkers. The average size of each class is twenty-five students. Every child is helped to discover those talents and special skills that will equip him or her for a better life.

Since most of the families have not had an education, PCF believes that providing the parents with basic skills is just as important as educating their children. Using a holistic approach, the

school offers adult literacy, remedial classes, courses in parenting skills, financial planning, family planning, nutrition, prenatal care and reproductive health, family counseling, and an advocacy program that stresses children's rights and gives advice on detecting sexual predators. It even advises families about the right materials for the repair of their houses. Fifty mothers are trained in primary health care, after which they teach other mothers in the community how to deal with their children's ailments.

Walker has been applying creative problem-solving techniques to combat the realities of living without a permanent home, work or food source. When attendance started to drop soon after the school opened, she learned that it was because the children felt guilty about being fed two meals a day at school while their families often went hungry. Her solution was to reward perfect weekly attendance with a sack of rice and canned food to take home. Moreover, she decided that only families whose children were full-time students could avail themselves of free medical services, livelihood training and income-generating projects for the older children and the parents.

Walker's fund-raising abilities have been as innovative as her problem-solving. Before establishing PCF, she used her salary from a second job, sky dived, and cut off her hair to earn sponsorship money. Since then, 85 percent of funding for the school has been raised in the U.K. through grant-making trusts and foundations and a child sponsorship program (P80,000 per year covers the cost of one child and support for his or her family).

PCF has also started a waste collection service. The school employs waste pickers to segregate waste materials, which are then sold as part of the foundation's sustainability program. Parents are also trained to produce items such as school uniforms, bags, aprons, pencil cases, jewelry and teddy bears, often from recycled materials, and then offered jobs making them. Besides helping them earn a living, these projects are also a source of funds for PCF.

It has not always been easy for Walker to navigate such uncharted territory. She says, with a half-smile, "Each year presents new challenges that all feel like the biggest at the time until they are overcome." But this is a lady who will stop at nothing when she believes something needs to be done. The parents were unwilling to have their older children attend school because they needed them to work at the dumpsite. Walker then decided to move into the dumpsite and live there for several weekends, working alongside the waste pickers until she had gained their trust. She says proudly, "Now we have over three hundred older children in our schools who had never been to school before."

The lessons she has learned along the way are sometimes as educational as the challenges she has faced. She explains, "Doing too much too quickly for a family can cause them to become too dependent on us, so we have learned to go slowly and help gradu-

ally." It is difficult to teach the principle of giving to a community that has nothing, but it is necessary. To remind the residents to help others, the children in the choir and the dance group perform for other disadvantaged groups for free.

Walker sometimes feels that dedicating her life to help the "poorest of the poor" is like a being caught in a never-ending whirlwind, but there are moments that remind her why these children must be given every chance in life to succeed. At PCF, extra-curricular activities such as sports, dance, theater and art are offered as incentives for them to do well in school. Last year the students were selected to play football at the Mosman Cup, and Walker remembers that the first day the children arrived for practice, the coaches broke down and cried. She describes that day: "The children, coming from areas where open space is filled with mountains of garbage, somersaulted and leaped for joy at the sight of a field of green grass!"

She later learned that the sports club where the PCF students would practice were actually delighted to have them play there because during every half time they collected all the garbage its members had left. The children simply could not leave plastic bottles or aluminum-canned drinks on the club grounds as these represented "money" to them.

Before making that giant leap into humanitarian work, Walker had managed sales and distribution for a media group in the U.K. She says her adolescence and early adult years were characterized by emotional darkness and many self-destructive experiences, but her instinct to survive was always strong. She eventually found her way to a "good life" but it lacked purpose, and that was when she was led to renounce atheism and become a Christian.

Soon afterward, she took a three-month break and went to the Philippines to redefine herself. She explains how her experiences with the Tondo children caused a 180-degree turn in the direction of her own life: "When I worked for corporations I never had time to consider anyone else's problems other than my own. I had not given to charity nor considered it my responsibility to do anything about it. From the moment I saw the abject poverty that other people were living in, I became part of the human race, I considered my needs and wants were worthless in comparison to the suffering of innocent children and their families."

Walker has been living in the Philippines since 2006, and now says that living a simpler life so that the people she is helping can have a slightly better one is something that, to her surprise, has come easily. Last year she was awarded an MBE (Member of the British Empire) by Britain's Queen Elizabeth, but she refuses to take credit for the honor. Instead she says, "It was the average disadvantaged Filipino who turned my life around and transformed me from a selfish human being into a compassionate one. I feel I owe them everything."



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She reveals, "I know my own painful past will never leave me completely. Sometimes I look at a child and I can feel the pain in her heart. I recognize it but my pain is redirected to doing good."

In 2005 Walker received a scare from the government that threatened the future of the PCF school in its current location. In response, she searched for a permanent solution that would also be a huge step towards ending child labor in Tondo. She signed a memorandum of agreement entitling PCF to use a 1,443-square-meter piece of land on the former Smokey Mountain site, and she has embarked on her most ambitious project yet. She is building a school big enough to educate a thousand children up to the college level, which will also be the world's largest school made from recycled shipping container vans.

The new school, due to open in December, is a collaborative effort made possible by the corporate donations of seventy-two shipping containers and building supplies, individual contributions of money or services, and both expatriate and Filipino volunteer architects and engineers. There is not enough funding to keep both schools open, and so the PCF's existing school will be used to run an expanded program of livelihood projects for parents.

Walker may be a visionary but she is also practical, and her plans for the future reflect this side of her. She would happily

"have a go at solving the world's problems," she says, but she will focus on what she knows works. Knowing that any plans of replicating this model in other dumpsites around the country will require the sustainability of her projects, her focus now is on developing income-generating projects so that PCF can expand as a self-sufficient organization.

A visit to the school and to the surrounding dumpsite area that the children call home is more than eye-opening. As one visitor remarked, "The smell reminds me of overripe bananas, heavy and sweet, mixed with other scents whose origins I don't want to know. The grayish-brown soil is soaked with water and soft from the tires of trucks loaded with the waste of a city of 14 million people." Without a doubt, PCF is an oasis in a desert of dirt and noise.

The contrast between the faces of the children attending the school and those still working at the dumpsite is a stark reminder that in a world where issues often fade to grey, certain things are still very much black and white. These children have a right to live a life with options, and one where they can grow up safe, healthy and sufficiently educated so that an escape from poverty won't be just a distant dream. Jane Walker's gift to the dumpsite communities has been to provide a cocoon in which their children can be nurtured and from which they can emerge, having learned that they do have wings, and that they do in fact, know how to fly. ❖