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Sen. Loren Legarda

Eyeing a Green Presidency

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She Stoops to Conquer—and Heal

IF Susann Roth is a woman of great vision today, it is probably because her eyes were opened at such a young age.

Susann remembers the exact moment she awakened to the reality of inequalities in the world—it was while visiting a famous church in Mexico City when she was 10 years old.

"It was all gold on the inside, but right outside there were really poor beggars everywhere," she recalls. "I asked myself, 'How can this happen? How can a church be so rich inside while the people around it are so poor?' I think this was when I realized that I wanted to live in a developing country and make a difference there."

In the 23 years since she started to question what she saw around her, Susann has studied medicine and worked as a doctor in Europe, America and Asia. She has traveled extensively, yet it was falling in love with and marrying fellow German Alex Roth that opened the door to her greatest journey of all—living in the Philippines.

The life that this accomplished lady has led since moving to Manila in 2005 has had the momentum of somewhere between gale winds and a hurricane. In the past three and a half years, she has gotten married and given birth to two children, worked in local hospitals, and last June graduated from the University of the Philippines with a master's degree in public health.

Though Susann had to give up her original plan to work as a doctor in Germany in order to follow Alex's career move to Manila, she knew exactly what she would do when she arrived. Armed with a PhD in medical sciences, a residency in emergency medicine and intensive care medicine at the University of Heidelberg in Germany, and work experience in cardiothoracic, general and trauma surgery, she set her sights on learning about the Philippine medical system by working in a government hospital.

Learning that foreign doctors were not allowed to have their own clinic, she decided to follow her other passion—public health. In addition to having worked with a public health NGO in India, her background in this area consisted of public health classes in university and courses on medicine in tropical and in developing countries.

With a hunger for knowledge as innate as her love for new experiences, she applied for and was accepted in a three-year Masters of Public Health program at the University of the Philippines, while simultaneously embarking on a fellowship in Dermatology and Tropical Medicine at the Skin and Cancer Foundation.

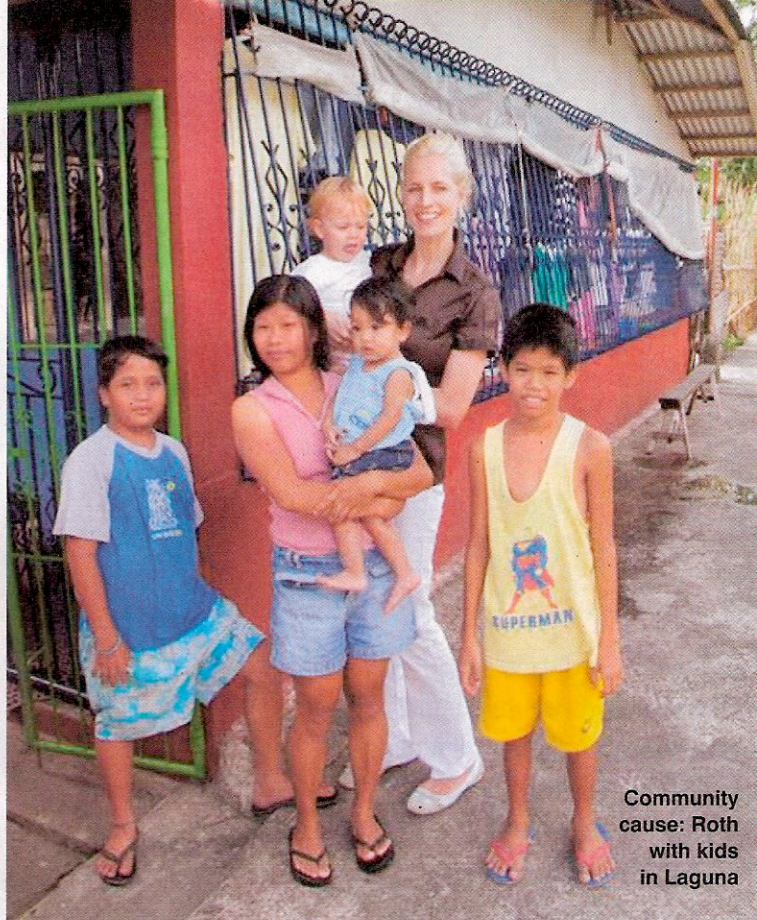
Despite her formidable degrees from prominent universities abroad, Susann Roth chose to take up her MA in Public Health in the Philippines and work in government hospitals in her quest for social justice

The latter provided her with a wider scope of valuable insights and experiences through her work in government hospitals in Makati and Quezon City.

The UP Masters Program combined distance learning and actual classes at the UP campus, a school which impressed Susann for many reasons. The fact that 90 percent of the professors were female and came from such a broad academic background was only the first of these. She describes: "Most of them have MD, PhD, MphD degrees from Japan or Australia, or other countries. They are also ideological, politically conscious, nationalistic and want to give something back to their country."

With an emphasis on the practical application of theories, the course program culminated in a six-week group field study in Pangil, Laguna. The study focused specifically on diabetes after surveys indicated it was among the leading causes of death in the community. The result of the field study was "Diabetes: *Kayang Kaya Kapag Healthy Lifestyle Ka*, (Diabetes: Manageable with a Healthy Lifestyle)" a prevention and monitoring program that would cover the entire population of 27,600 in all the eight barangays, and would be run by the Municipal Health Office and a core group of diabetes mellitus patients.

This experience of living and working in a small community taught Susann valuable lessons for her own future career growth. On a more personal level, it provided opportunities for bonding with her two children, ages 2 and 6 months, whom she had to take along with her during her field work, as she was still breastfeeding. In a way, it also fulfilled her desire to give her children the same early exposure to different lifestyles that her parents gave her.



Community cause: Roth with kids in Laguna

"My parents were very liberal and loved to travel," she explains. "Instead of investing in houses or jewelry, they spent money on experiencing new things." She recalls trips to Morocco and Tunisia, where the questions of her youth continued to rankle. "I wanted to know why we lived in such a wealthy country while those people didn't, and I wondered how we could possibly balance these inequities in the world."

In a life spent trying to find answers to these questions, Susann has reached a point where she now has to play many different roles all at once. She shares her own secret to successfully balancing being wife, mother, student and doctor: "You really need good time management—and support from your partner. You also need the desire to accomplish something. I'm a person who can't rest—I can't just do nothing. If I don't accomplish something in a day, I'm in a bad mood."

Believing in the importance of improving the health insurance system in the Philippines, Susann's ideal next step would be to work as a government consultant for health care. "I think 80 percent of all health expenses are paid out-of-pocket, which really leave a high debt in families that have to borrow money to cover the health expenses of their parents or siblings. So people have to be educated about the importance of insurance."

Working for a local or international organization that focuses on improving the situation of women and children in the Philippines is another goal. Given her own experiences on the challenges of being a working mother, Susann believes in the importance of empowering women through opportunities where they can combine family

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and work.

Safeguarding the health of the individual is just part of the bigger picture of helping them improve their overall economic situation, she says. "I think it is important to support especially the not-so-privileged people. There is still a lot that can be done—health education like teaching them what to eat, what to give their children, about breast feeding, and about alternative and natural medicine. This will lessen their health expenses, save them money, and support them in their livelihood and their ability to also invest money for their future."

The lady is driven by the belief that every human being should be provided with basic needs like clean water and a job that is able to feed the family. Once the economic situation is stable, then you can have the chance to develop your mind, she points out. "It's no wonder that someone who is thinking about what to eat the next day is not able to study. It's proven that 65 percent of the world's population is not able to fulfill their academic potential because they have nutrition deficiencies."

Susann has chosen to build a home and plant roots for a future for her family in the Philippines because, she says, "It's not about falling in love or the beauty of the place. It's about the people. I have met amazing, interesting people from all classes."

When Susann arrived in the Philippines, the seed she planted was to find a way to help the country. Her master's degree and the training in local hospitals have given her the tools with which that seed can now blossom. For Susann—and most likely for her two young children as well—this is just the beginning of the garden of her love for the Philippines. •