

Blazing trails

Ain't no mountain high enough for HELP Trailblazers in the Philippines.

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FOR most privileged folks, Payatas is nothing but a dumpsite. However, for the families that stay there, it is home. Located in Quezon City, Manila, the Payatas district once bore a lot of potential. Sadly, rapid industrialisation turned the place from a promising agricultural spot into a 50-acre landfill.

Basic necessities are scarce here, and the struggling families rely on scavenging the landfill or working in "junk shops" to sort and recycle material from the site to make ends meet.

Their state of living is a far cry from most of our relatively privileged lives and the situation left a lasting impression on the HELP Trailblazers team that was recently there for a community service project.

For the first half of their 10-day expedition in the

Philippines, dubbed Project Kumusta, the team of eight students, accompanied by two advisors from HELP University, participated in several community-based programmes hosted by Fondacio Foundation and a local Catholic parish.

The experience exposed the Trailblazers to the immense hardship that these families go through everyday.

"I saw a community living in a dumpsite with their basic human rights violated, and having to scavenge for a living," said Jameson Tan, 20, a Psychology student. "That's not the life a child should ever go through."

Fellow Trailblazer Thomas Chan, 23, added: "The biggest problem (about Payatas) is not the smell of rubbish, but the fumes from vehicles and machines that pollute their air and water."

In spite of these devastating conditions, the Trailblazers noticed that the Payatas community still makes the best out of what they have.

Tan recalled seeing the children behaving selflessly during the feeding sessions. As the feeding programme is only open to children between the ages of two and 12, most of them would

bring the food home to

The children in the Payatas district live on a 50-acre landfill, but you would never be able to tell from the smiles on their faces.

share with their family members instead of finishing it on their own.

"I can never imagine myself being in the position of the hungry children, and still think of my family members. It impresses me how they aren't fazed by their hardships even at such a young age," said Tay Mi Shyuan, 21.

After a valuable experience in Payatas, the team spent three days hiking the Cordillera Ranges in Kibungan. But, of course, it was no easy climb as it had already been a long and tiring week for them. With the guidance of Uncharted Philippines, the Trailblazers managed to reach the highest point at 1750 metres.

"When I was alone in my tent on the peak, I actually cried because I felt so overwhelmed by this accomplishment. The hike was certainly a challenge for me, and I managed to push through," admitted Sathia Preeya.

In fact, the entire team – including the supporting members –



Tham Pei Ting founded Project Kumusta because she felt it was necessary to expose her fellow students to a different kind of reality.



Jameson Tan was deeply affected by the impoverished state of the children living in Payatas.

"I wanted to spark something in the Trailblazers by having them experience some of these harsh realities first-hand. Hopefully, this spark will translate into positive changes in their lives and the lives of others," Tham expressed.

From the leadership aspect, Michael explained: "Everything the Trailblazers had to do – from fund-raising

activities to the actual expedition – were meant to test their leadership skills.

"We want to see how each individual reacts when they are put in a challenging situation."

She also revealed that Project Kumusta was merely a pilot run for the Trailblazers' bigger projects. For 2014, they are planning to organise a three-week expedition in Nepal.

ought to feel proud of their achievements from Project Kumusta. They have been working together tirelessly since September last year to raise funds for the project. The Trailblazers successfully raised RM30,940 with the help of several generous sponsors.

Project founder and team advisor Tham Pei Ting said Project Kumusta was inspired by an experience she had in India a few years ago.

Together with fellow team advisor Helena Michael, they decided to make it part of the Trailblazers' leadership programme.

■ Check out [facebook.com/HELPTrailblazers](https://www.facebook.com/HELPTrailblazers) to learn about their community-based projects.

