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DEFENSE CONTRACT MANAGEMENT AGENCY

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VOICING
our **VISION**

A world-wide team player

Patrick Tremblay | DCMA Public Affairs

Midway through her Keystone program, Christie Ong packed her bags and went to the Philippines. For three weeks she immersed herself in a new culture, one both different yet familiar to her at the same time. She came back to her desk at Defense Contract Management Agency Baltimore a better person and employee. “I’ve been deaf my entire life,” said Ong. “I’ve had an internal fire, a motivation, to get involved with the deaf community. The exchange program gave me the opportunity to learn and understand the community in the Philippines as it relates to deaf culture, advocacy and education.”

The EMPOWER Program was sponsored by the Department of State’s Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs and led by a non-profit organization Discovering Deaf Worlds.

Filipino and American participants were linked in focusing on strengthening the capacity of Filipino leaders from the Philippine Federation of the Deaf and its 18 member organizations.

“It’s a cross-cultural exchange program for professionals,” explained Ong. “There were eight American participants and 11 Filipino participants.” From May 5 through 26, 2013, the Filipinos came to the U.S., and then the Americans traveled to the Philippines from November 14 through December 5.

“We went to three cities — Manila, Dumaguete City, and Bohol. We met with a variety of Philippine government officials and visited a number of cultural sites,” continued Ong. “During this time, we facilitated seven capacity building sessions, four with PFD and one each with (Deaf Empowerment Awareness Foundation), Inc.; Deaf

Boholanos Society; and the Philippine National Association of Sign Language Interpreters. In each of these we asked questions to learn about key issues the Filipino deaf community is facing.”

Ong said one significant issue is geography. “The Philippines have approximately 7,000 islands separated into three island groups. While the capital Manila is where the majority of PFD leaders reside, many other deaf leaders representing 18 member organizations live throughout the country, so they have to figure out how to collaborate and overcome challenges of being from different areas. We learned of a lot of intriguing and intricate challenges, to say the least.”

Communication is a common challenge among deaf people, but American Sign Language and technology have made things relatively standardized



(Left) Christie Ong, a contract administrator at Defense Contract Management Agency Baltimore meets with students from Tagbilaran for the Hearing Impaired in Tagbilaran City, Bohol, Philippines. (Right) American and Filipino participants in the EMPOWER program meet members of the Dumaguete Effata Association of the Deaf, Philippine Federation of the Deaf, and Discovering Deaf Worlds, at the Dumaguete City, Philippines, mayor’s office. The visit was part of a professional exchange program designed to build capacity among the Filipino deaf community. (Contributed photos) (Opposite) Ong signs the letters for DCMA. (DCMA photo illustration by Stephen Hickok)

in the U.S. In the Philippines, just basic communication can still be a hindrance.

“Many deaf Filipinos aren’t proficient orally or in written Tagalog, their native language, which makes it more difficult to communicate with others who are,” said Ong. “They are more familiar with Filipino Sign Language, English, American Sign Language, or Signing Exact English depending on whichever language their family, friends and educational institution uses,” she continued. “So how can Filipino deaf leaders communicate with politicians and educators to make effective changes for deaf Filipinos throughout the country?”

The Discovering Deaf Worlds contingent visited the Philippines at a tense time, just five days after Typhoon Haiyan tore the country apart, killing thousands and sending the island nation

into turmoil. For Ong and the delegates, the timing made the visit more poignant and valuable. One particular meeting in Bohol stands out.

“Bohol was recovering from earthquake tremors that followed Typhoon Haiyan,” explained Ong. “We were proceeding with our capacity building session and the lights went out for the last half of our meeting. Instead of wrapping up, we used our phones to project light onto the speakers so that we could continue communicating in the dark.”

“That really inspired us. It was really a unique experience, and something I brought back with me. For example, if we have power issues here, or a shutdown, we still have to support the war effort, maybe in innovative ways.”

A Seattle native, Ong completed her bachelor’s at the Rochester Institute

of Technology in New York. After graduating she received a Fulbright Grant to research early intervention efforts for parents raising deaf and hard of hearing children in Italy. It was on a visit back to RIT that she first learned of DCMA, and in October 2011 she moved to the East Coast for a contract administrator Keystone position at DCMA Baltimore and to be closer to her brother, a professional clarinetist for “The President’s Own” United States Marine Band stationed in Washington, D.C.

“Christie started as a Keystone that hit the ground running when she arrived at Baltimore,” said Charlene Ivey, DCMA Baltimore director. “She took every opportunity to use her maximum drive to fulfill her job responsibilities and complete her (Defense Acquisition Workforce Improvement Act)

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DCMA Baltimore
Contracts Group chief

certification and other training in short order. Christie displays an ability to learn rapidly and adapt quickly to changing situations.”

It wasn’t surprising, then, when Ivey heard that Ong was interested in the Discovering Deaf Worlds program.

“This was such a great opportunity for her, and I had every confidence in her judgment and professionalism to represent DCMA well,” Ivey said. “She had demonstrated that she is strongly motivated to achieve optimal results and displays a strong incentive to succeed in all her work.”

It was an ambitious move for a young Keystone, to pursue a program outside of the agency that would require nearly a month away from the office.

Marian McDonald, Baltimore’s Contracts Group chief, was instrumental in helping Ong get the agency permission required to participate in the program, and in putting together an application packet to become a participant.

“I think the program made a big difference for Christie, because it was a unique opportunity,” said McDonald. “It happened right after the typhoon, so not

only did she go for the program, but it was also a real humanitarian effort.

“I think I appreciate Christie more because of what she went through doing that, and it helped develop terrific characteristics she already had. And she brought those back to the (contract management office) — she’s a world-wide team player. I’m very proud of Christie.”

Tracy Williams agrees. She was Ong’s supervisor during the Philippines exchange. “When she told me about volunteering for the program I thought ‘how exciting for someone to go out and really experience something and bring it back to the agency.’ How we can better ourselves as people, but also show that as a federal organization we’re committed to helping others — that’s important.”

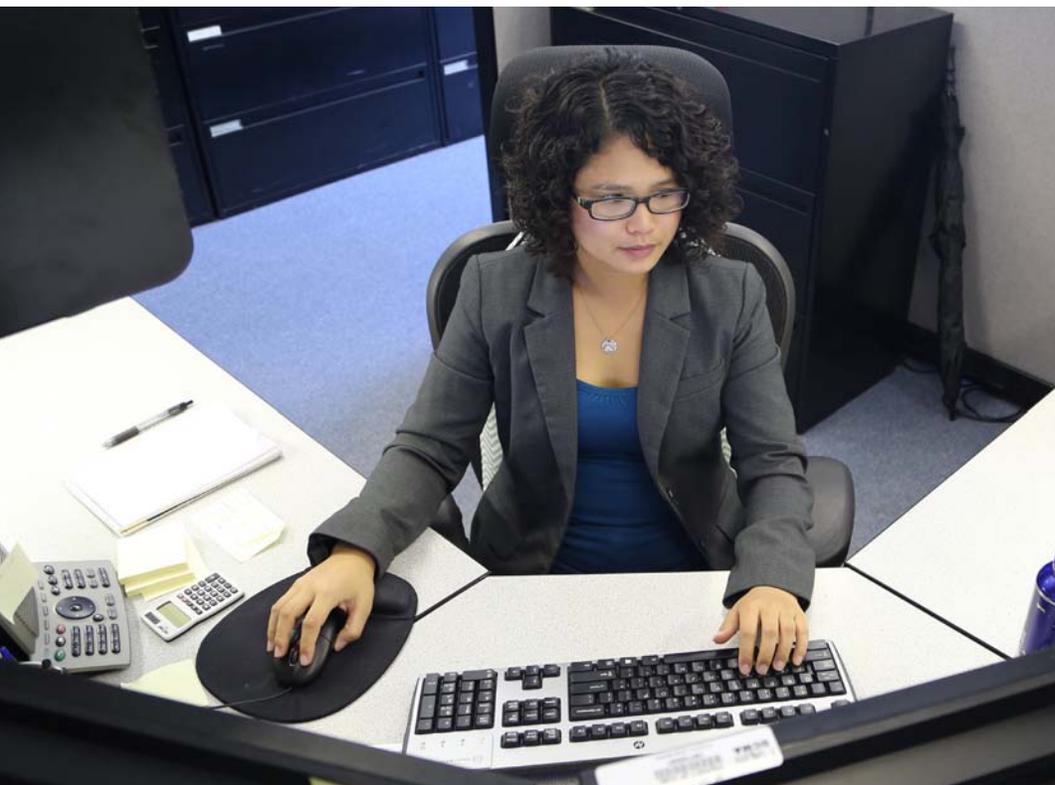
“She’s always been very mature, intelligent, professional,” continued Williams, “so I knew when she went over there she’d show ‘not only am I a DCMA employee, but I’m an individual who can make a positive impact.’”

Ong continues to be a strong employee at Baltimore, transitioning from ambitious Keystone to valued journeyman. She thinks often of her time with her Filipino counterparts, and the lessons of collaboration and innovation she learned then.

“I strongly support and encourage other professionals to look for opportunities to learn more outside of their comfort zone, and outside their organization. There’s so much you can learn from other people’s stories and situations that you can bring back with you,” said Ong.

Ong continues to stay in touch with the Discovering Deaf Worlds program through newsletters and on social media, and has been active in working within the Baltimore office to educate and increase awareness of the deaf culture and how to work with deaf individuals.

“While Ms. Ong is a part of the deaf and hard of hearing culture at DCMA Baltimore she epitomizes the belief that all employees can, and do, offer their full talents to the achievement of our mission,” Ivey said. “She and her leadership see no limitations in her ability to thrive and excel in our CMO. I believe she’s a future DCMA leader.”



Christie Ong at her workstation at Defense Contract Management Agency Baltimore. (DCMA photo by Stephen Hickok)