



RID Members and Staff Participate in Professional Exchange in the Philippines

By Julie Anne Schafer, Esq., Director of Public Policy & Advocacy

On Nov. 15, 2013, RID-certified members Melanie Deleon-Benham, Sarah Houge and Elizabeth Jean-Baptiste, and RID Director of Public Policy and Advocacy Julie Anne Schafer traveled halfway around the world to work with the Filipino Deaf community in capacity-building and organizational development as part of Discovering Deaf Worlds (DDW). They were part of the American delegation to continue Discovering Deaf Worlds' (DDW) work

with the Philippine Federation of the Deaf (PFD).

DDW is a non-profit agency based in Rochester, N.Y., that advances the self-determination of signing Deaf communities through local capacity-building in developing countries. The EMPOWER Program, sponsored by the U.S. Dept. of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA) in cooperation with the Office of the Secretary's Special Advisor for

International Disability Rights, supports two-way professional exchanges designed to bolster disability rights in more than 20 countries from all geographic regions.

DDW partnered with the ECA to implement the EMPOWER Communities program, which brought 11 Filipinos to the United States in May 2013 for a month-long fellowship to identify creative solutions to challenges facing Deaf communities in the Philippines.

Learning and Growing with Each Other

Natividad P. Natividad, Philippine National Association of Sign Language Interpreters board member, was a member of the Filipino delegation in May 2013. "As a participant of the EMPOWER exchange team to the United States... I was fascinated by the true essence of this line, 'The Deaf Can!'" Natividad explained. "Meeting



Filipino interpreters pose with DDW EMPOWER participants at the Deaf Leadership Forum, held at the De La Salle - College of Saint Benilde in Manila.

Right: Filipino and American Empower Participants with Filipino Sign Language interpreters at a capacity-building session in Manila.

PROFESSIONAL FELLOWS EMPOWER PROGRAM



and learning from Deaf professionals and interpreters in the U.S. transformed my mind-knowledge of ‘The Deaf Can!’ to a heart-and-soul experience. Deaf people, interpreters and advocates in my country need to work together so that interpreters will be treated with dignity, provided with a healthy and safe working environment and given continuing skills and professional growth.”

During the three-week exchange, the U.S. delegates visited Manila, Dumaguette City, and Bohol, meeting with various elected officials, non-governmental organizations (NGOs),

and Deaf community organizations. A strong focus was placed on strengthening the capacity of the Philippine Federation of the Deaf and its 18-member organizations through work and partnerships with the government, NGOs, and other entities.

Bayani Generoso was one of the Filipino interpreters who worked with the exchange participants in Manila. He immediately recognized similarities between the exchange participants and his work as an interpreter. “Growing up in Vancouver, Canada, a place where Deaf people are very much empowered and there are many systems in place for Deaf



INTERNATIONAL ADVOCACY

people to gain access to information, I had to be very careful about imposing my ideas to the Filipino Deaf and interpreting communities without taking to account the cultural and socio-economic state of these communities,” he said. “It’s very easy to say that I come from a place where things are closer to the ideal and try to work to bring these communities up to that standard. But having that perception, I’ve noticed, only brings to light the deficits and doesn’t take into account the strengths within these respective communities.”

Capacity-Building with Filipino Interpreters

During the exchange, DDW hosted a capacity-building session with the interpreter organizations in the Philippines. Schafer co-moderated while the other three worked in small groups to facilitate dialogue and share their experiences with the Filipino interpreters. The Filipino interpreters, looking to RID as a model, discussed the challenges they face, including a need for:

- A revised and utilized Code of Ethics
- An interpreter training program
- More professional development opportunities
- Recognition of interpreters (who are often expected to volunteer) as a profession

Bayani said about the discussions, “It was nice to be able to connect with other interpreters that ‘get it,’ me having been educated in the west... I’ve come to realize though that it might be too ambitious to model ourselves exactly to the western way. I think the Philippines need to work more closely with other third-world countries to figure out how to bridge all the gaps when it comes to our work. Professionals from the west are inspirational, but I think our community would benefit more from hearing success stories from the developing world.”

In explaining some of the challenges faced by Filipino interpreters, Bayani recognized the need for widespread education and information-sharing in the Philippines related to increasing the skill level of interpreters, especially in voicing skills, educating Deaf people on how to work with interpreters, working with other educators with different approaches to Deaf education, working with the system in the public and private sectors that may not know anything about interpreting, and

informing entities about the need for teaming and preparation prior to an interpreting assignment.

Houge, a CDI, sees opportunities for the Deaf community and interpreters to work together to increase the skills and connections between the two groups. “Certainly there are opportunities to grow as a community and as a profession,” she said, “But I think the Philippines may be ahead of the U.S. in [working with] Deaf interpreters.” Deaf interpreters helped facilitate communication during many of the capacity-building sessions, explaining complex concepts in Filipino Sign Language as the Americans acquired the language.

Deleon-Benham added, “It was amazing to see how organically a deaf community has visual communicators [deaf interpreters] in use and accepted before sign language interpreters.”

Reflections on the Exchange Program

During the three-week exchange, the participants learned from the Filipino community and from each other. “It’s so humbling to see an interpreting community’s dreams take root and grow, to see leaders emerge and a vibrant Deaf community growing right along side,” said Deleon-Benham.

Of his experience with the exchange participants, Bayani said, “I see good things in our partnership with DDW. I hope that their role will truly be about empowering and helping the Deaf community here heal from the many years of oppression and systematic abuse that is prevalent in the Deaf community. DDW’s role should be about nurturing our future leaders.”

DDW’s work will continue in the Philippines through a two-year grant from U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) through September 30, 2015. Under this cooperative agreement, known as “Expanding the Participation of People with Disabilities,” or “EXPAND,” DDW will continue to provide organizational development, process consultation, and training to improve the sustainability of PFD and its 18 member organizations.

For more, visit www.discoveringdeafworlds.com. ■



Julie Ann Schafer, Esq., is the Director of Public Policy & Advocacy at RID.



American and Filipino EMPOWER participants discuss challenges facing sign language interpreters in the Philippines during an capacity-building session in Manila.