“Filipino ka ba?” *Are you Filipino?*

“Opo, yes,” I say. “Go Manny Pacquiao!”

Manny “Pac-man” Pacquiao is a national hero of my country. This boxing legend and I come from a little collection of islands in the South Pacific called the Philippines. Even though he came to America with a set future, many Filipinos have to work hard to rise to their top.

I was born in a small region in the Philippines called Calumpit. I have no recollections of my time there because we immigrated to America when I was three years old. For me, growing up in America was the same as any other American born kid. The parents of my American friends treated me as one of their own. I never thought of myself to be anything else but Filipino-American. My family raised me to have the same morals and values as if I was being brought up in the Philippines. But of course, it isn’t the same as being raised in a family-oriented nation like my homeland.

When I came home with a large stack of homework, I would do the work by myself and not ask my parents for assistance. My mom was always busy cleaning the house or cooking dinner; while my dad was busy doing handy work around the house or working on the computer. I felt that if I asked for their help, I would be bothering them so I always decided to tough it out and figure the problems out myself. I knew that my parents had better things to do since they were raising three kids in a new country. As young as I was, I understood that my parents were working so hard only for the benefit of their children. As I reminisce, I realize that I took my life for granted. After my balik-bayan (return back to my country) it dawned on me that my theory about staying strong but standing alone, was false.

When I first arrived at the airport in Manila, the capital of the Philippines, the terminal was filled with people. It came to the point where people were pushing each other and shoving their luggage into one another. The lines through customs were very long, and especially for the people who didn’t have Philippine Citizenship. My mom began to talk to me in the customs line and told me to get something small out so we could give to the officers so going through would be quick and easy. I told her that wasn’t necessary because they shouldn’t even be doing that in the first place. She said, “Anak, (my child) we aren’t in America. It’s different when we are in an airport here.” I did as I was told and took out a Hershey’s Bar and handed it to my mother. Subsequently, passing through customs went so much smoother than it was for the person next to us.
We exited the airport and the humidity mixed with the pollution was almost unbearable. Once we found our family, we made our one and a half hour journey back to the house where we were staying. It was around 10 o’clock at night and the streets were still so packed with cars. When we got to the house I wanted to freshen up but the bathroom had no hot water. I asked my grandmother, Lola Mama, what happened to the hot water and she asked me if I wanted her to boil me some.

I was in awe that the house we were staying had no warm water. I declined the hot water and took a cold shower. Having hot water was a luxury to them. After being nice and clean, we started giving out our pasalubong (pass-ah-loo-bong), gifts and souvenirs, to our family who were there. In America when we want a new outfit we just go out to the mall and buy ourselves something nice. Or if we want something to eat or we need to buy something, we just go to the store and buy it. We do these things because we can and we want to. But in my country, when I was giving my aunts and uncles their gifts of simple shirts, shorts, chocolates, vitamins and anything else they asked for, they were so grateful.

In my first week we roamed the capital city of Mailla. My cousins introduced me to new foods from vendors, and surprisingly, new foods from their McDonalds. It wasn’t the typical hamburger, French fries and a Coke. They sold rice burgers where instead of the traditional bun, they have rice. After bargaining with some street venders we now had a mission to get back home.

Like in major American cities, there are many ways to get around in Mailla. Jeepneys are a great way to commute when in the city of Manila. Just like they sound, they are jeep like vehicles with colorful decorations which have no doors. To get on you just jump on and pray you don’t fall and you yell, “Para para! (Stop stop!” when you want to get off. When getting off, we went to an FX stop. An FX is one of the many ways to go from the city into the suburbs. It is similar to a large van that can hold up to 11 people, including the driver. He just drives along the main roads and when we are close to the intersection of their stop, the passengers yell, “Pare! My friend!” After we got out of the FX, we had to split up to make the last leg of our journey home. We took the tricycle which is like a motorcycle with a sidecar for the passengers to sit in.

The Phillipnes are known for the beautiful culture, amazing beaches, and the fame of being the texting capital of the world. But it is widely recognized that our government is corrupt and many people live in poverty. As I look out the window of the FX I see kids my age and younger begging for money on every street corner to pay for a daily meal. Many of these children live alongside the green patches beside
the highway railing in homes made out of cardboard and tin scraps. When a loved one dies they bury their fragile bodies underneath the dirt sidewalks because they can’t afford a real funeral.

After my visit to the Philippines it gave me a new perspective on the life I live. I don’t take things for granted and I appreciate the family that I’ve been blessed with. As I look at my surroundings, I see a whole different world compared to the one that I visited, still wondering which is home. This experience has opened my eyes and has made me realize that there are more unfortunate people in the world than myself and others.

What amazed me about visiting the Phillipines were how people there have to strive and work their hardest in order to survive. I know many lives in the United States can be described in the same way, and I intend to take nothing away from that reality. But during my visit, it looked different, as if the struggling people didn’t even know what and how things could be different.
What I saw in my native homeland was what so many people around the world struggle with - food on their table, a house to live in and time with family. It’s hard not to think while back home that so may people in America take some of these possessions for granted. And just when I thought that my experience would show me so many things that I did not have, I realized that what it has shown me more clear than anything else, is what I already have.