



KuyaThom

goes home



Interview
July 2021

Kuya Thom goes home

Thomas Kellenberger, the Swiss founder of the Philippine Island Kids Int'l. Foundation, Inc. (PIKIFI) and Island Kids Philippines (IKP) Switzerland, is embarking on a new project entitled: «Kuya Thom goes home». We asked him what this project aims for. The video of the interview can also be viewed on our [website](#).

- ***Thomas, on August 25, 2021, you will be on your way «from home to home». You plan to walk from your hometown Unterseen to your second home Cagayan de Oro City, on the southern Philippine Island of Mindanao. This entails approx. 15'000 kms and the traversing of 22 countries. How did this project come to life?***

I think it came about because of the current world situation, as well as my own personal dreams and motivation. For one, our aid organization is dependent on donations. The present situation with the pandemic has affected our fundraising activities. For the past year all of our fundraising events had to be canceled or postponed. At the same time, plans for future events are difficult to make. Although we are very grateful that most of our donors have kept their pledges even during the pandemic, we have to continue to be creative in coming up with new ideas for fundraising. In the 14 years of our existence we have achieved much, as we were able to uplift the lives of numerous Filipino children and their poverty stricken families in a sustainable manner. Yet there is still so much more to be done. We feel that our work continues to be very important, all the more now during these most difficult times. Our walk for a cause offers good opportunities to raise awareness about our cause for children in street situations and children who have become victims of abuse and exploitation. At the same time, the project is somehow also the realization of an old, personal dream of walking the Camino de Santiago trail. The planned route is a further development of this dream of mine. After a difficult time of mourning over the loss of my dear mother Ruth, I hope the trek will offer me time for healing and introspection. Lastly, the trip marks my new beginning in the Philippines. In 2018, the Philippine Co-founder Virgelia Demata terminated her management job in a construction company and was employed as the fulltime executive director of our operations in the Philippines. She gradually took over all the operations of PIKIFI. This was done also with the hindsight that I would be staying in Switzerland for

a longer period of time due to my mother's ailment. In addition, our long-time employee and senior social worker, Grizshelle Labang, was promoted into the position of the supervising social worker and as such was given additional managerial tasks. The two women have proven that under their competent leadership the daily operations and project implementation are doing well. I am therefore confident to be able to start a second project under the umbrella of PIKIFI and tailored after its successful concept of the children's village. I feel my work in the Philippines is still in progress, whilst my desire to support victims of abuse and those living in extreme poverty situations continues to be strong.

On my long way home, I hope to bring more awareness and sensitivity to the plight of children in street situations and child victims of abuse and exploitation. At the same time, such awareness may evoke sympathy and support for the cause in terms of financial donations for the realization of a second children's village. The goal of establishing a second children's village will serve as my inspiration on my long journey to Cagayan de Oro.

- ***Can we say then that the path is already the goal for you?***

Exactly, the journey is the goal. Success will therefore not be measured by the actual distance covered during this endeavor, but by the fact that this trek is undertaken for the sake of the needy children and their families.

I also hope to gain new insights for my work in the Philippines and also for my personal growth and



self-actualization during this long trek across a vast diversity of different cultures. It is important for me to highlight this because I am not trying to prove that I can travel the whole distance on foot. Even if I terminate my walk earlier, I will consider my task fulfilled if I gain valuable inputs from similar projects in other places, and at the same time generate the needed funds for a second children's village.

■ **What is this new project about?**

With the long-distance hike, I hope to elicit more sympathy and concern for the abused and neglected children all over the world, as well as for our work in the Philippines. Along the way, I hope to visit other aid organizations to learn from their rich experiences while sharing my own with them. Thus this trip is also a learning journey for me. The newly gained insights shall help me with the planning for a second children's village that will offer full-time care for abused and neglected children as well as therapeutic programs for their families.

five houses. Presently, there are 64 children and youth in our facility. New inquiries for admission are coming in almost weekly. We often have to reject these requests. This simply underlines the dire need for additional child-care places. With PIKIFI in the Philippines and IKP in Switzerland and Germany we were able to show that we can offer direct and sustainable support to children in need and their poverty-stricken families without generating high administrative costs. Upon my arrival in the Philippines I would like to continue our successful model with the start of another project under the umbrella of PIKIFI.

■ **How dangerous is traveling through countries like Turkey, Iran, Kyrgyzstan, China, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Myanmar, to name a few?**

Without the intention to give a wrong impression of naiveté, I would like to believe in the phrase, "the way you call into the forest is the way it comes back", or the golden rule, "treat others the way you wish to be treated". Most people don't want to do you any harm. Countries we fear the most are sometimes home to the most hospitable people. Prior to my return to Switzerland in August 2020, I have lived on the island of Mindanao for eleven years. There is a travel warning for tourists visiting this island. I traveled freely in Mindanao and rarely felt threatened. On the contrary, I experienced sincere hospitality and had numerous heartwarming experiences with the natives. The people there would say: „Be good to every stranger because he could be an angel ". The only justified fear I can mention is connected with my work. For instance, when we face traffickers and child molesters in court we are up against influential and corrupt lawyers. Nevertheless, by no means do I mean to ignore travel advisories. Of course, we know there are always risks. That is why a good preparation is essential. Through careful planning foreseeable dangers can hopefully be avoided. Since months already, a qualified team of professionals is helping me doing meticulous preparations for my trip. We are also in contact with people who had traveled a similar route. I am very glad to have such a dedicated support team, not only for the thorough planning of this hike but also through online connection when I will be walking already. They will be supporting me along the way.



■ **What other difficulties do you think might arise?**

What concerns me most at the moment is the situation with the pandemic. The entry regulations for many countries change constantly. This makes it very difficult to plan. I will have to be flexible. Being alone will also be a challenge. Although I welcome solitude at times, I am definitely a sociable person. I like being around people. I am open and approachable. After all, I am used to live in a community. Therefore, I welcome every possible encounter, new or familiar during this trip. I look forward to interesting cultural exchanges.

■ **So are you going to walk alone?**

Presumably, yes. However, I would be very glad if some of my friends, donors, partners and sponsors or other dear people will be inspired to join me at a stretch of their choice. This will be in accordance with the motto "shared suffering is half a sorrow, shared joy is complete joy". Some young people from my current employer,

the YouCount Foundation, will join me during the first seven days of my trip. I have been working at YouCount in Wilderswil since December 2020 as a social pedagogue. The alpine trek with the supervised boys will be the beginning of my journey. It will also conclude my current work in Switzerland.

■ **How long will you be on the road?**

Around 20 months, presuming I will complete the whole distance on foot.

■ **How can you be contacted if one is interested in joining you?**

I am already looking forward to hear from interested individuals. Inquiries can be sent to: info@islandkids.ch. Detailed information about the progress of the walk will be activated on our [website](#) in due time.



■ How do you finance this project?

The [Galvaswiss AG](#) will shoulder my personal costs for this hiking endeavor. The same company has already supported my personal outlay for the eleven years I had been living in Cagayan de Oro. It was due to their generous support that I was able to focus fulltime on our projects in the Philippines. For this I am very grateful. All donations given for the project "Kuya Thom Goes Home" will therefore fully benefit the realization of the proposed second children's village for children in street situations and victims of abuse and exploitation.

I have to add here that I will be traveling with a low budget. I will live very simple during this trip. I'll sleep in my tent, on farms, on couches of couch surfing hosts, and only once in a while in a hostel or an affordable hotel. And I will do my own cooking. This way, my personal expenditures will be put to absolute minimum. My whole support team is also working voluntarily, for which I am very grateful.

■ Keyword donations: How can one support the project "Kuya Thom Goes Home" or rather the specific project of building a second children's village?

Our account details are on our [website](#). Information for donors and sponsors who specifically want to support the project for the new children's village can be found by pressing the button "Kuya Thom".

■ Do you have a specific amount in mind that you want to achieve with this "Walk for a Cause"?

I would like to accrue at least CHF 165'000 (or € 153'000) when possible.

This amount corresponds to the purchase of real property and the construction of two houses, each accommodating 15 children. It further covers the cost for full-time care of all 30 children for one year. It will enable us to start a second children's village and ensures financed operation for the first year.

I also hope to find new long-term donors to fund the operation of our children's villages. With CHF 90 per month, donors can guarantee for the fulltime professional care and the complete education of one distressed and neglected child in our facility. With more donations we could, of course, build and manage more houses. However, having CHF 165,000 would be a very good start.

■ Finally: What does «Kuya» Thom actually mean?

„Kuya“ is a respectful Filipino salutation that means „older brother“. The children from our village and from the streets call me by that name, so that I am known in Cagayan de Oro as Kuya Thom.

Kuya Thom, we wish you meaningful encounters and experiences on your long journey and of course, also that many will financially support your project. We look forward to hearing from you on your website, the newsletter and via Social media. I wish you success!



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NEWSLETTER



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