

# Sewage, Fish, Burning Wood, and Love: My Three Weeks in Tacloban City, Philippines, with All Hands

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## Working to Mobilize a Connected Society: Who is All Hands?

All Hands is the devoted staff and volunteers who stop at nothing to get the work done. All Hands is a US-based, non-profit organization that addresses the immediate and long-term needs of communities impacted by natural disasters. This is achieved by engaging volunteers, partner organizations and local communities. All Hands began<sup>1</sup> after the Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami in December 2004 when business professional David Campbell went to Thailand to assist in response work. There he co-founded HandsOnThailand where he worked with volunteers to rebuild five fishing villages in Phuket. Then following Hurricane Katrina in 2005, David and other volunteers formed HandsOnUSA, which became All Hands Volunteers in 2010. In the past 10 years, over 28,000 volunteers from more than 70 countries on 50 disaster response and recovery projects have worked in nine countries throughout the world.

All Hands works in collaboration with various corporations, non-profits, and alliances with the goal of providing immediate, effective and sustainable support to communities in the wake of natural disasters by harnessing the energy and commitment of volunteers. Some corporate sponsors include USA Today, Southwest, Google, Credit Suisse and Eileen Fisher. International partners are IOM, CRS, Shelter Box and Operation Blessing International. Most recently, following Superstorm Sandy in 2012, a new partnership with the Red Cross was formed. In line with the All Hands framework is maintaining organizational transparency--all financial and tax information is available online, including how funding is spent and how resources are allocated beginning with 2006.<sup>2</sup>

All Hands international response has been seen in Bangladesh, Dominica, Haiti, Indonesia, Japan, Malawi, Nepal, Peru, Philippines and Thailand. Domestic response has been seen in Texas,

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<sup>1</sup> Watch David Campbell tell the story <http://hands.org/founder-david-campbell-talks-all-hands/>

<sup>2</sup> This information and language has been taken from the All Hands website. <http://hands.org/about-us/>

Tennessee, Rhode Island, Oklahoma North Dakota, New York, Nebraska, Missouri, Mississippi, Minnesota, Michigan, Massachusetts, Kentucky, Iowa, Illinois, Hawaii, Colorado, Arkansas and Alabama. They will continue to be seen wherever and whenever disaster strikes. It started with realizing a need that turned into the formulation of networks that connected people and gathered resources from all over the world. That is what All Hands continues to do today. It mobilizes a connected society, bridging cultural and geographical divides, utilizing differences, for the purpose of responding to disaster.

## Typhoon Yolanda

Typhoon Haiyan, referred to as Typhoon Yolanda in the Philippines, first made landfall in Guiuan, Eastern Samar<sup>3</sup>, on November 8, 2013. 16 million people in the Philippines were affected, 6,201 deaths, 4.1 million people displaced and 1.1 million homes damaged or destroyed.<sup>4</sup> Yolanda is considered to be the “most powerful storm to make landfall in recorded history,”<sup>5</sup> with one-minute sustained winds of 196 mph and gusts reaching 235 mph.<sup>6</sup> The Joint Typhoon Warning Center estimated Yolanda attained a category 5 equivalent on the Saffir Simpson scale. By the evening of November 7, areas including Biliran Island, Eastern Samar, Leyte, northern Cebu, metro Cebu, Samar and Southern Letye received public storm warning signal 4, the highest warning level.<sup>7</sup> The Tacloban City Convention Center, serving as an evacuation center, was not sufficient as the storm surge flooded the first floor. This storm surge was responsible for a great loss of life. Communication was down,

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<sup>3</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Typhoon\\_Haiyan](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Typhoon_Haiyan)

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.usaid.gov/haiyan/fy14/fs21>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.gov.ph/crisis-response/updates-typhoon-yolanda/>

<sup>6</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Typhoon\\_Haiyan](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Typhoon_Haiyan)

<sup>7</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Typhoon\\_Haiyan](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Typhoon_Haiyan)

roads were blocked, cities devastated and relief efforts at risk. Slow response efforts increased tension, as looting became a means of survival.

According to the WHO, as one of the world's most disaster prone regions, the national agencies in the Philippines along with the international community need to be prepared to respond to multiple disasters in a given year.<sup>8</sup> In 2013, when Yolanda hit, the Philippines had already experienced an earthquake in Bohol and conflict in Zamboanga displacing 75,000 people. National and international response to Yolanda was carried about by already exhausted agencies and an outstretched health system.<sup>9</sup>

## Response

During immediate response to Yolanda, the Philippine government, together with the international humanitarian system (UN clusters) addressed initial life-saving needs. While these agencies had been warned previously about the approaching storm, the strength had not been anticipated. There were 11 clusters working in the Philippines and efficient coordination amongst them was critical for effective response. Brett Moore, World Vision's shelter advisor, worked in the shelter cluster with the International Federation of the Red Cross, Red Crescent Societies, Save the Children and Medair. Moore explains, "one group might say we've got 10,000 tarps, another will say we've got tents, another we've got purifiers. We have to work out each other's capacity."<sup>10</sup> Military contributions from the US, UK and Australia also aided the response effort. However, political tensions between the

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.odihpn.org/humanitarian-exchange-magazine/issue-63/typhoon-haiyan-lessons-from-the-response-and-how-to-prepare-for-the-future>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.odihpn.org/humanitarian-exchange-magazine/issue-63/typhoon-haiyan-lessons-from-the-response-and-how-to-prepare-for-the-future>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/poverty-matters/2014/feb/07/typhoon-haiyan-disaster-response-philippines-relief-effort>

central government and the local government in Tacloban, for example, heavily dictated response efforts. “Many people in Tacloban are bitter the government did not send troops to keep order for a week, creating the conditions for desperate people to loot shops for supplies.”<sup>11</sup>

While I heard from people who survived Yolanda that the strength of the typhoon was unknown to them prior, the government of the Philippines website explains, “anticipating the severity of the typhoon, the Philippine government made the necessary preparations three days before landfall- including prepositioning relief goods, deploying first responders, and setting up evacuation centers for affected families.”<sup>12</sup>

## Welcome to Tacloban City, Philippines

I arrived in Tacloban near the All Hands base and had a few hours to spare before they greeted new volunteers. I sat on a curb around the corner from base and took out a book. Within one minute, I was approached by someone in the neighborhood who told me to come with him inside. The pastora welcomed me into her ministry and into her home. I was served eggs, coffee, bread and the words of Jesus Christ. I sat in her home for about an hour and half listening to the importance of being redeemed and achieving salvation. She showed me around her home, her bedroom and the place she sits to write her weekly sermons. She was not always religious, G-d’s light came to her one night and Jesus spoke to her. Her life now is doing the work of Christ and healing the poor. She is not comfortable around the rich and says they will not be redeemed unless they give to the poor.

Her son built the house she lives in. Her grandchildren were busy around the house cleaning, sweeping and doing laundry. Ants were in abundance. Peanut butter and cheese-wiz sat on the table;

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<sup>11</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/poverty-matters/2014/feb/07/typhoon-haiyan-disaster-response-philippines-relief-effort>

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.gov.ph/crisis-response/updates-typhoon-yolanda/>

the pastora herself very overweight. During Yolanda, she was in Manila without communication with her family for five days. She said the people were not prepared and did not have a plan, but Jesus saved her and her home- I almost believed it.

Alex, the taxi driver who took me from the airport to the All Hands base, said little by little the city is being rebuilt, and there is a lot of corruption that makes it difficult to get things done. Upon first impression, the Filipino people are very open, welcoming and appreciative of the work All Hands is doing in the community. There are no tourists in Tacloban City and the USAID logo can be seen from all corners. I tried to get an idea from the pastora about how the community feels regarding the presence and work of All Hands- she did not know. As the hours passed and it was approaching 8am, I waited until an appropriate time to excuse myself. A few more minutes I would have been baptized in her bathroom tub, although she did make a point of telling me that as an Israelite, I will be redeemed anyway.

## Tasks and Personal Experiences

### Life on Base and on Site

The living environment on base is communal. There is a large shared kitchen and dining area where two meals a day are provided, lunch is served near the various work sites. The daily schedule includes 6am wake up, breakfast and departure for the day's work at 7am. There are two designated breaks during the day in addition to lunch, which takes place around noon. Work site clean up begins around 16:30. Daily tools and materials are taken out in the morning and are all logged. When the working day is over, all the tools and materials are returned and logged back in. Upon returning to base, there is a nightly meeting around 17:30, which includes reviewing the day's events, what needs to be

done tomorrow, upcoming events and speeches by new volunteers or those who may be leaving. Following the nightly meetings, your evenings are free. Throughout the week, there are often various night activities you can participate in. One night a fiesta was held at location 83-C<sup>13</sup> to celebrate the completion of an All Hands project there. The 83-C Disaster Resilient Core Homes Rebuilding Program consisted of constructing 40 new two-and-a-half story homes for selected families. There was food, drinking, dancing, tears and laughter. Community engagement took place beyond the 7-17:00 daily working hours.

Every Tuesday and Friday evening were sign-up nights. Volunteers were able to choose which project they wanted to work on for the following three days. There were several projects taking place at any given time, mostly dependent upon funding, approval and capacity. Examples of various projects included an evacuation center, building homes, a day care center, police outpost station and the basketball court. All Hands is also contracted to do some projects by other organizations, one such organization being Streetlight.<sup>14</sup>

Throughout my three weeks with All Hands, I spent most of my time on the basketball court, one day at Streetlight and one day doing deconstruction on a new sight. Another project I participated in was community clean up. This consisted of going into different barangay where a project was soon to start and working with the community there to clean up the area. One morning consisted of going in and clearing a section of dirt, rubble and garbage in order to build an area for the kids to play in, which is now complete. Another clean up session consisted of clearing the sewage in the barangay and clearing the paths for where the deconstruction was to begin the following week.

I spent the first three days working on a community space project at barangay 61, a stage and basketball court at the request of the community. I ended up spending most of my three weeks working

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<sup>13</sup> <http://definitelyfilipino.com/blog/2015/08/24/all-hands-volunteers-offers-yolanda-victims-a-fresh-start-with-new-homes/>

<sup>14</sup> STREETLIGHT <http://www.streetlight.org/english>

on this site, I wanted the opportunity to see the completion of the project. Areas in Magallanes along the water have been instated as a 40-meter no-build zone. This means it is illegal to build any permanent structures 40 meters from the water. The communities that live there are very poor and their livelihood is based on fishing. They have remained there despite the no-build zone, no running water and limited opportunity. Most of the children in these communities cannot afford to go to school.

There was a lot to learn- the name of tools, how to use a handsaw, how to plan wood, how to remove nails from wood, how to hand mix concrete. The lines of the basketball court needed to be drawn. The court then needed to be painted. The fencing around the court needed to be put up, and the stage needed to be constructed. Everyone simultaneously becomes a teacher and a student. Local carpenters and welders are hired by All Hands. We all work together; a family is formed. You learn the names of the children in the barangay as they watch you paint and construct. They are sure to say good morning and ask you what your name is about 30 times a day. Their little footprints left in the wet paint served as a reminder- this court is for them.

All Hands meets with the community to find out what they would like in their community and All Hands assesses if they have the budget and capacity to do so. This community wanted to rebuild the public space by the water that once stood as a space of pride for welcoming visitors and celebrations. This was a seven-week project, and I arrived during week four. There was still a lot of work that needed to be done but you could already see the court and the area where the stage would be built. Prior to my arrival, half the court was relayed with concrete and envisioning a finished product was difficult. The old stage, which was currently outside the perimeter of the court in the water, exposed rebar and concrete. The children used it like a playground.

In addition to the international volunteers that come to work with All Hands, there are also local volunteers. I spent a lot of time working on the court with Stephanie, a 22-year-old woman from



Tacloban City, who is currently devoting her time to All Hands. Stephanie is a smart and educated woman who speaks fluent English but is unable to get a job. Her family is facing a financial crisis, since her father, the breadwinner, passed away. She spoke of the corruption and hardships in the Philippines, often leaving for the day with nine pesos in her pocket, unsure of how she will return home at the end of the day or purchase food. She highlighted some of the struggles post Yolanda- her family did not receive food or relief for a week, people wandered around the city like zombies in search of sustenance, dead bodies on the streets. Only now are people receiving aid to repair their destroyed homes. Prices at the mall skyrocketed and caps were placed on the amount of goods you could purchase. Even for those with money, it would only get you so far. Choked up with tears running down her face, Stephanie recounted the night of the storm as she held her younger sister close and prayed. She is fearless as she struggles with some of life's most difficult questions.

Around day three the smells got to me. Toxins- paint, acid, paint thinner, sewage, fish--I was seeing double. The physical and mental challenges of recovery set in. I questioned the work I was doing and the value of it all, sweat dripped from my face onto the court, no shade in sight, relentless heat. As the weeks went on and progress on the basketball court continued, more and more families came outside. At the end of the day, we would see kids playing basketball, using the court and enjoying the space. This image was one that helped me to understand why we were doing what we were doing. Yes, they need clean drinking water, sanitation and education, but they also need a place to be a community and to celebrate life.

Dengue, bronchitis and bed bugs spread throughout the base. Everyone worked together, strong feelings of devotion present as those coughing up lungs did not want to let anyone down. But taking care of your mental and physical health is crucial, without which, no work can be done. Communication is also a crucial aspect of the work but I found intricate layers in communication. Even

when you are communicating clearly, if everyone is not on the same page, tension arises. I was in awe and admiration of others ability to communicate feelings, confront areas of conflict and to persevere.

## Catholic Relief Services

While All Hands does not take government money, it does work closely with Catholic Relief Services (CRS) who receives funding from USAID. In response to Yolanda, CRS is providing services in the areas of WASH, shelter, and disaster risk reduction (DRR).<sup>15</sup> I got the opportunity to work with the DRR and urban planning program manager at CRS. Part of his work includes running disaster drills and preparedness planning with the barangay. He told me that before Yolanda they had fire and earthquake preparedness, but not Typhoon. While the Philippines is no stranger to typhoons, they were not prepared for the strength and destruction Yolanda would bring. I expressed some of my concerns and frustrations with the living conditions of the families in the barangay we worked in. It was then I found out the water encompassing barangay 61, where the children play, is positive for E-Coli. There are active WASH projects in the city working on building latrines and taking assessment of communities who still have open defecation, but there is a lot of work to be done.

From the DRR manager's experience, barangay have been open to evacuation drills and will come to preparedness meetings but communities with more money tend to take less interest. He informed me of an evacuation drill they would be running over the weekend and invited me to participate in it. The drill would include the participation of 50 families, a maximum of five people from each family, representing 12 barangay. The main objective of the drill is to observe how the leaders of each barangay communicate with their community to evacuate them and follow proper

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<sup>15</sup> <http://www.crs.org/media-center/philippines-typhoon-haiyan-response>

registration and division of resources once they are in the evacuation center. The leaders have been trained previously by CRS and now was the time to observe how they put their training into action.

As an observer, I was assigned to observe the community aspect of barangay 31. I was given general information about the evacuation drill and an assessment to fill out which I would hand in at the end of the drill. The observers met at the CRS office at 7 am and the drill ran from 8-12 noon. Following the drill, we met with the barangay leaders and each observer was asked to stand up and share their observations with the group. It was a valuable experience to be able to participate in the drill and to gain insight into the complexities of community preparedness.

## Until Next Time

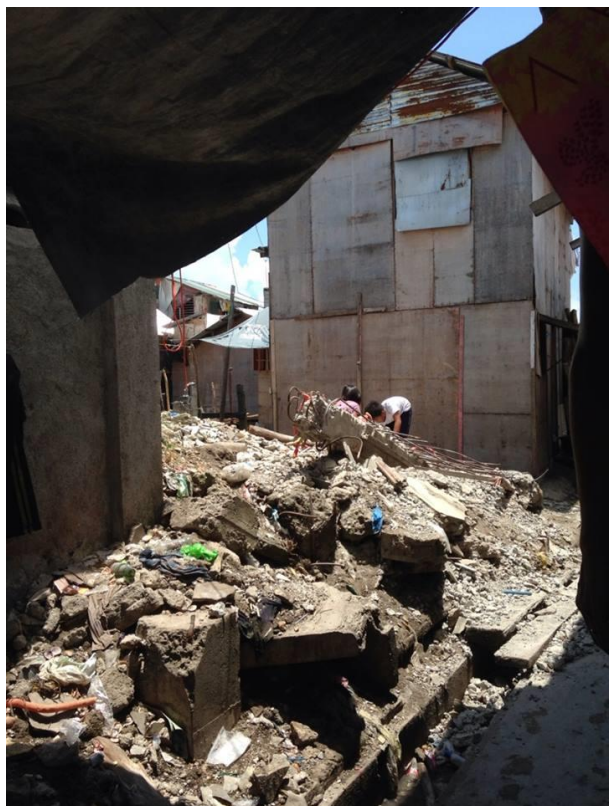
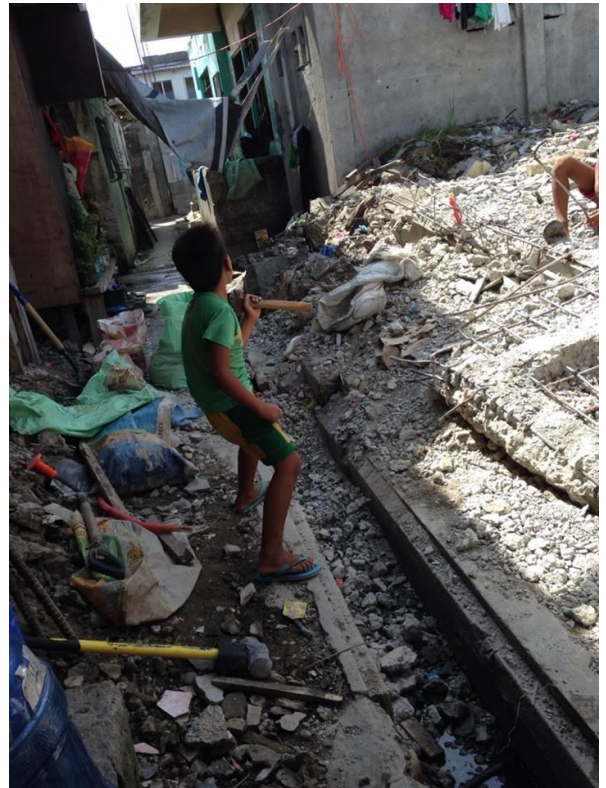
Emotions ran high. The sun is powerful and provides little remission. You are sore, dripping with sweat, covered in heat rash, mosquito bites and sunburnt. Everyone you pass on the way to work is smiling, yelling good morning and waving hello. One full day spent pulling nails out of wood, but it didn't matter; the work needed to be done, and someone had to do it.

The walk from pre-departure in the Tacloban airport to the airplane departing for Manila brought me to tears, overwhelmed by feelings of love and work incomplete. Taking in the last smell of burning fire and slowing my walk to delay my inevitable boarding of the aircraft. I closely cherish the journey I had all ending too soon. I want another glimpse, another breath of Tacloban, the paradoxical life of sewage, poverty, laughter and love.

## Pictures



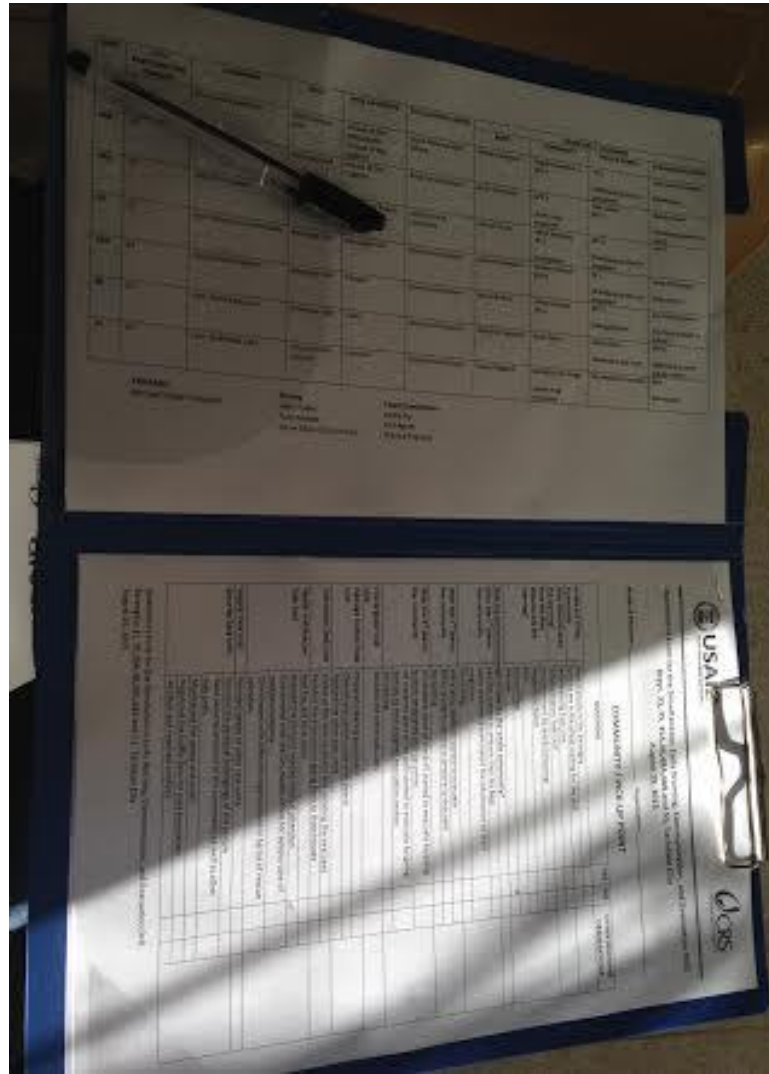


















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