

A Voice for Sheila

By Ann Jensis-Dale, DCMA Public Affairs

“If you want others to be happy, practice compassion. If you want to be happy, practice compassion.” — Dalai Lama

On a trip to visit family in the Philippines in May 2005, Richard Pianko, DCMA Hartford property administrator, helped provide the gift of life to a young girl who suffered a form of eye cancer. Pianko and his wife, Evelyn, often receive requests to help the poor citizens in remote areas of the Philippines.

According to Pianko, the average salary of a Philippine government worker is \$200 a month before taxes and benefit deductions. Government doctors' salaries are between \$300 and \$800, depending on rank and length of service. Poor citizens can earn as little as \$200 a month or less, depending on their jobs and extended family support. The source of income for the indigent is primarily based on crops they raise on small plots of land,



An ophthalmologist examines a patient's eye after surgery. (Photo courtesy of iStockphoto.com)

crops that are sometimes destroyed by rainstorms and typhoons.

“In the Philippine culture, the community is thought of as an extended family, even though there is no direct blood or DNA relations,” said Pianko. “The culture is based on interdependence, with each citizen relying on the kindness of his neighbor to assist him in time of need.”

During their visit to the Philippines, Pianko and his wife received a request from local citizens to help some poor residents in Cauayan, North Luzon, a remote area a 12-hour drive from Manila known for communist rebel operations. “Aside from the dangers we faced traveling to this area, we both felt it was more important to help the needy. Besides — our brave U.S. troops face this type of danger in every normal workday,” said Pianko.

The Piankos traveled to this area to help an elderly woman. Unfortunately, by the time the Piankos arrived, the elderly woman was dead. While being told of the

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woman's death, something caught Pianko's attention. "I thought it was some kind of small animal scurrying around and hiding under a bamboo straw 'Nipa' hut," said Pianko. It turned out to be a nine-year-old girl named Sheila, who had received no medical treatment over the years for what was later found to be a frequently fatal form of eye cancer. "She was hiding from the world because of a large golf-ball-size tumor protruding from her left eye socket. It was at that moment I had my translators inform Sheila's relatives that I would find a way to obtain the medical treatment to resolve her

current condition. I was going to be the voice for Sheila."

The residents of the remote areas of the Philippines have no access to medical care, whether preventative or urgent. "Many times the local people's only hope for assistance for a sick family member is a friendly foreigner passing through willing to lend a hand," said Pianko. "There is no procedure to provide medical care for the poor in the Philippines. I learned that fact firsthand, when trying to help Sheila."

Pianko reported Sheila's case to the Philippine government, which provided only a site visit from its

social services department. Pianko decided that if he wanted to help Sheila, he had to create a solution and provide for the medical care she urgently needed. Upon returning to the United States, he began researching several medical charities that provide services for the eyes. "I just kept sending e-mails, telling them Sheila's story and her situation, asking for help," said Pianko. One day, he received a letter from Surgical Eye Expeditions International, Inc., a charity group located in California. SEE provided him with the names of two Filipino doctors who had previously assisted poor Filipinos with eye problems.

"I e-mailed and called Drs. Asilo and Sison to ask for their help. Dr. Asilo was kind enough to travel to visit Sheila and offer an evaluation and referred her to Dr. Sison in Manila," said Pianko. Through his new contacts, Pianko learned that the Philippine General Hospital in Manila performs free surgery on indigent patients with a referral from a doctor. Though the surgery would be free, all related testing, hospitalization, food, housing and logistical support for the patient had to be paid out-of-pocket. These costs amounted to \$2,000 — an amount equal to two years' salary for Sheila's family. "I paid for the special tests, transportation, living costs and food for this effort. I also developed many relationships with family members, extended family members and local friends. Everyone helped in any way they could," said Pianko.

Nothing could have prepared Pianko for the logistical problems



Sheila Balog after her February 2006 eye cancer surgery operation at Philippine General Hospital in Manila. (Photo taken by Richard Pianko, DCMA Hartford)

in the months preceding Sheila's surgery. The road to her operation began in late 2005. Sheila and her family had never ventured outside their isolated farming community nor did they speak English or Tagalog. They speak one of many native tribal dialects almost unknown to the outside world.

The language barrier, along with the non-availability of cell phones, made regular communication with Sheila difficult. To overcome the problem, a system of "runners" consisting of family and friends got the information to Sheila's family. Pianko explained how this system worked. "I would receive information from the doctors via telephone or e-mail here in the U.S. Then I would send that information to my brother-in-law via e-mail and cell phone. He would call his father and my father-in-law, who live in the northern region near Sheila and who also spoke the dialect that Sheila and her family would understand. Next step was to contact runners from my father-in-law's town to relay messages to Sheila's family. This back and forth proved to be very frustrating," said Pianko.



Richard Pianko, right, DCMA Hartford property administrator, and Mayor Duarte, left, of Davao City, Mindanao, Philippines during a May 2007 meeting to arrange hosting of American medical missionaries who desire to visit Davao City and perform charity work at a local church. (Photo courtesy of Richard Pianko, DCMA Hartford)

Once messages were received and confirmed, travel to Manila for doctors' appointments could be arranged for Sheila. This was also a very difficult task. "The trips back and forth from Sheila's farm community to Manila sometimes took more than 12 hours ... [over] terrain that is very rough with high mountain passes and not many paved roads, but the scenery was beautiful and spectacular," said Pianko. "There were times during rainstorms and typhoons that the

runners had to paddle across rivers, since the bridges and roads were impassable, to get the messages to Sheila's family."

Although the logistics, terrain and language were all challenges, Pianko and his family were never deterred from trying to get Sheila the medical care she required. Finally, in February 2006, Sheila was operated on at the Philippine General Hospital and cured of her eye cancer. "I am amazed at the amount of generosity, human dignity and compassion many doctors had during this process," said Pianko.

Pianko visited Sheila in May 2007 and is very happy to report she is living a healthy, normal life. "We gave her a voice; she no longer has to hide from the world." **C**

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