



# International time

WORDS Sarah Baker

*Pictured: (Left) Rachel (back left) with children from Bahay Tuluyan. (Below) Kerry-Anne.*

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<http://www.australianvolunteers.com/work/index.asp>



**An overseas immersion experience is a great way to expand your horizons, learning more about the world and yourself. Sarah Baker spoke to two young women who spent time working with street children in the Philippines.**

**K**erri-Anne Williams, 21, says her two months in Manila from December 2005 to January 2006 gave her another perspective on life in an underdeveloped country.

Volunteering through Australian Volunteers International, the social work student from Sydney says she and the 14 other volunteers aged 18 to 25 were confronted by pollution and poverty on their arrival in the Philippines.

Kerri-Anne spent a lot of her time working at Bahay-Tuluyan, a project that supports children in the streets and in their homes, while also undertaking a research project on the needs of living in the prison system.

As part of that project, she visited a jail in the Philippines where she saw children living in over-crowded, exposed cells. At the time of her visit, 20 children were in the jail. Some would be there for short periods, others for up to three years awaiting trial. She says children as young as 12 were being held for petty crimes, such

as stealing three coconuts, or breaking the night curfew. 'It was heart-wrenching to see', she says.

She also spent three days living with a local family in a squatters' camp in Manila, sharing a space no longer than the length of her body with seven other family members.

The connections she made with people were the most rewarding part of the experience.

'Being able to just have fun with the kids, put smiles on their faces and give them a big hug', she says.

Rachel O'Leary spent ten weeks in the Philippines, living in Tiaong in the Quezon region.

The 29-year-old public health student from Sydney had previously volunteered in Costa Rica, but says the Philippines experience was unlike anything she had encountered.

Confronted by the extreme poverty, Rachel couldn't believe how 'affectionate, friendly and well-adjusted the kids were.'

Rachel says she was heavily involved in educational projects that

promoted environmental issues. She spent two days teaching children at the Bahay Tuluyan centre about waste education, recycling and the dangers of plastic bags, and helping them build compost trenches, pits and even creating a worm farm.

She introduced the children to netball, and helped set up temporary rings, while also teaching them songs. 'The children were willing to participate and give everything a go', she says.

Coming home, Rachel says it was difficult to re-adjust and leave behind the children she had formed such close relationships with. But the heartfelt gesture of a girl who offered Rachel the only toy she owned as a symbol of appreciation is something that will remain with her forever.

'I recommend spending time in a less developed country to appreciate our world, to understand what people go through, to contribute to others and make a difference.'