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Hawaii News | Incidental Lives

Meeting students overseas has man studying education

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Posted May 10, 2016

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For more than 50 years, the nonprofit Pacific and Asian Affairs Council has provided international, global affairs instruction to public high school students. This month we share the stories of students whose lives were meaningfully touched by their participation in PAAC.

It was the faces that did it.

Peter Borcena was just a few weeks removed from his high school graduation and on his first trip outside Oahu since arriving from the Philippines at age 4.

He and his cohorts from the Pacific and Asian Affairs Council had raised money earlier in the year to buy books for the Vietnamese schoolchildren with whom they were now, wondrously, face to face.

"We helped the teacher there, just going over the ABCs with the kids," said Borcena, 24. "They were so happy and enthusiastic. Just seeing their reactions made us forget that we were in another country. It was as if there were no differences, that ultimately we were all the same."

Borcena's parents hailed from Caloocan in the Philippines and brought Peter and his brother to Hawaii in search of better opportunities.

Borcena watched his parents labor — Orlando cleaning cars for a local dealership, Susan working as a housekeeper at a Waikiki hotel — to provide for the family. He also listened closely to his mother's exhortations to study hard and make school his top priority.

It was during his time at Farrington High School that Borcena got involved with the Pacific and Asian Affairs Council, drawn in by the opportunity to learn more about the world around him.

"I didn't have any exposure to the outside world," Borcena said. "I'd never been to the mainland or even an outer island. I wanted to learn about other places and their languages and issues."

A self-professed introvert, Borcena found that he enjoyed attending statewide PAAC conferences and meeting students from different backgrounds who shared his interest in global affairs.

After serving as president of his school's PAAC chapter, Borcena traveled to Vietnam for a two-week tour that changed his life.

Borcena went on to earn a degree in biology at Hawaii Pacific University. While at HPU he continued to pursue his interest in international education by joining the United Nations club and participating in the Model UN program in New York. He also interned at PAAC, working with high school officers who reminded him so much of himself.

For a time, Borcena had planned on becoming a pharmacist. But with the vision of those Vietnamese schoolchildren ever fresh in his memory, he has since decided to pursue a career in education. He starts a master's degree in education program at the University of Hawaii next fall.

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