



The campers dance their final performance at a local mall. More than 1,500 people attended.

Hip-Hop Happy

For two weeks in April and May, the U.S. Embassy in Manila sponsored a summer camp where 50 Filipino teens from diverse backgrounds shared their love of dance, community and country.

The Hip Hop Happy camp brought together emerging artists from across the country from the conflict-ridden Sulu Archipelago in Muslim Mindanao in the south to the indigenous people of the Cordillera region in the north. Selected for their academic achievement and leadership qualities, participants studied modern-urban dance and traditional Philippine dance for 12 days. Dance teachers also got two days of master classes.

The camp's workshops were led by Department of State Cultural Envoy Lenaya "Tweetie" Straker, an instructor at the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in New York.

The campers shared with Straker their dance traditions, music and communal values, which were drawn from throughout the Philippines. The camp's lectures, demonstrations and cultural activities culminated in a public performance at a local mall that drew more than 1,500 attendees.

Promoting Understanding

Many participants came from communities that had been fractured by violence from terrorist or insurgent groups. By the camp's end, they had become promoters of unity and understanding.

"It was my first time to join this kind of activity," said one camper. "Our place is known for violent rebels. When I was selected, I felt so happy and blessed."

For the project, the embassy partnered with Ballet Philippines and the Cultural

Center of the Philippines.

The participants were of mixed origins and, because they were randomly grouped, learned patience and appreciation of others' cultures and religions. They also learned self-discipline, self-confidence, teamwork, cooperation and a passion for dancing, a cultural center official said.

Amraida Jamasali, from the town of Tawi Tawi, thanked the embassy at the public performance and said, "We learned a lot—not only hip hop but also working with groups and understanding one another's culture. This learning will be treasured and shared with our own communities. We hope that you continue to conduct projects that promote peace and understanding among all cultures."

Embassy dance camp brings youths together /// By Najlaa Abdus-Samad



A Philippine television network interviews U.S. Cultural Envoy Lenaya "Tweetie" Straker and a teary-eyed female participant after the show. **Below:** Camp participants write their reflections on the camp's "freedom wall."



Besides the intensive dance lessons, participants engaged in discussions on trust, respect, understanding and mutual appreciation, and explored their goals and aspirations. Most also experienced their first airplane ride, first trip to their country's capital and first meeting with someone from a different province, religion and background—or from the U.S. Embassy.

The speakers included alumni of other Department programs, such as the Fusion Arts Exchange Program, the Kennedy Center Arts Programs and the Study of the U.S. Institutes. Participants visited such sites as the National Arts Center, the International Rice Research Institute and the Philippine High School for the Arts.

PAS Role

The public affairs section staffed the camp, which supported the embassy's goals of promoting mutual understanding, maintaining positive relationships and promoting equality, nonviolence, social responsibility and volunteerism.

The section exposed participants to the Department's online alumni community (www.alumni.state.gov) and has since kept in touch with them via Facebook, the State Alumni Web site and the ExchangesConnect social networking site, <http://connect.state.gov>. It also provided hands-on tutorials. An unforeseen benefit was that participants with little or no access to computers became adept at engaging with others responsibly via social media. Since the camp, two students have been offered scholarships to continue their college educations.

Ambassador Harry K. Thomas Jr. visited the camp and spoke with participants and members of the media, and Deputy Chief of Mission Leslie Bassett spoke at the final public performance. The widespread press coverage included a TV network's one-hour feature on the program, which was rebroadcast repeatedly after the camp's conclusion.

The final day of the camp was one of teary good-byes. The youths had bonded in a special way and offered testimonies on how the camp had changed their lives and their perceptions about the United States—and each other. ■

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