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## Frenchman chooses to live in the



## slums

[Society](#) — By [Karl Wilson](#) on Oct 16, 2009 at 12:55 am

Bernard Pierquin (rpt Pierquin) knows what it is like to be poor. For more than 20 years this mild-mannered Frenchman has run the Alouette Foundation in Malibay, Pasay City, and for two years he lived in the slum to try and understand what it is like to be poor... dirt poor.

“At first, the slum dwellers were a bit suspicious of this crazy foreigner living among them but they soon got use to me,” he said.

“It opened my eyes to what it is like to be poor in this country. I mean really poor where you have absolutely nothing.

“In most western countries you have a social welfare net to catch you. Here you have nothing ... absolutely nothing. It is a concept I think many foreigners don't quite understand when they come to the Philippines.”

For two years, Bernard's home was a small room in a shack deep inside the slum.

“At night, rats would come out and crawl over me and when it rained, it poured through the roof,” he said.

A creek runs through the slum and on each side, shacks have been erected over the years. As seen in the recent storm that battered Manila, these creeks are filled with garbage, thereby blocking the natural flow of water.

Bernard does not know how many people live in the slums. “My guess perhaps 3,000 families,” he said.

Walking through the slums, people would call out from dark doorways, “Hello Mr. Bernard!”

Over the last 20 years, his foundations have put more than 1,000 kids through school and college.

“Some have gone overseas, some have come back to the slums, others have moved on,” he said.

“Slum life is very different from life out on the streets. It can be very violent. People get killed; alcohol and drugs are big problems and women, young and old, are often raped. But at the same time, it can be loving which is probably hard for an outsider to understand.”

One young woman told her friend as we walked past: “They are looking at the real face of poverty.”

“The damp alleys that run through the slums are full of kids playing along with cats and dogs. Inside, the shack's color televisions flicker. Men lay prostrate on mats. Some old and sick, others just hung over.”

Bernard came to the Philippines in 1990. Back in France, he worked with drug addicts in rehabilitation centers. “I was looking for ways to help addicts and their addiction. We experimented with acupuncture but the government did not accept this form of treatment.

“I heard about faith healing in Baguio so I decided to have a look for myself. But I quickly learnt that many of them were frauds. I mean, the best known faith healer at the time drove a new Mercedes.”

Bernard headed down to Manila and the airport. He was stopped because he did not have the proper exit documents and had to wait a week.

That week changed his life for ever.

“I read about a squatter camp that had been bulldozed, so I went to have a look. I saw kids playing in the middle of all this rubbish. Then it dawned on me why I had come to the Philippines.

“My best friend was my Olympus camera. I was drawn into what was left of the slum. Social welfare department were distributing food. Something in my mine told me I had to stay ... this is where I belonged,” he said.

Between 1992 and 1993, he lived there. He set up a small school and today, many of those he helped educate send their kids to the school.

Has he made a difference?

“I don’t know. A few of the lucky ones have left. But essentially not a lot has changed. The slum area is getting bigger and women are having more and more children. I believe if I can help one escape this then I have done something worthwhile.”