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It has been two months since Cohort 8 of Casa Bayanihan has been in the Philippines. An alternative study abroad program, Casa Bayanihan centers around the pedagogy of praxis where students accompany people and their families in their communities in order to learn more about their lives and attempt to understand their realities. Students from the universities in the United States and the Philippines live together in houses a steep staircase away from Ateneo de Manila University known as the Harvard of the Philippines.

We all spend two days a week in our individual praxis communities. My praxis community is HULMA, a Rags2Riches branch of weavers who produce panels for high end bags and accessories. Rags2Riches is an organization that teaches people how to weave products and save money to improve their livelihood. In order to become a Rags2Riches collective of weavers, a community must already be organized around another organization or group. HULMA is organized around Children's International Philippines, or Abot Kamay, an organization from Kansas City that provides health care, special programs, and holiday gifts for children provided by the donations of international sponsors.

HULMA is an incredibly tight-knit collective due to the power of community organizing. I have spent days in Children's International playing with the children and helping them with their writing as well as the Rags2Riches workshop where workers assemble the products into bags. Most days, however, praxis consists of spending time with the weavers in their houses with their families. I have cooked beloved dishes like adobo and attempted to weave alongside the women in the community. They share their personal stories of their lives and hopes for the futures that provide insight into the realities of the Philippines.

This accompaniment is a profound way to learn about a country that is so different of that of my own in the United States. Much of the experience of Casa Batanihan is a constant immersion into a different place and culture that needs to be accompanied by reflection, that as an Advocate for Community Engagement have been taught to do for service learning. As I enter my second month here, I hope to continue to deepen my relationships with those in my praxis community in an attempt to understand lives different from that of my own.