

A Newly-Chartered Territory

An essay by Gabriela Lee

Truth be told, college life isn't easy, especially in the beginning. After all, college is uncharted territory, an unknown represented by the variable x , something that has not yet been solved even by the ancient Greeks or the Applied Math students. Everyone's first day experience is unique, and no matter how many stories you've heard from people who have gone to college, it still doesn't prepare you for the shock that comes. It's like a bucket of ice water being poured down the back of your shirt.

My first day of college was nerve-racking – perhaps an understatement. I was torn between crying, fainting, and wishing that a hole would open up under my feet and swallow me. You see, unlike most people, I didn't know anyone at all during that time. I was the only one from my school who passed UP Mindanao -- in fact, I was the only one from where I live who actually went there. Where did I study? Miriam College High School. Where's that? Quezon City. Yep, as in Metro Manila. As in Luzon. As in the northern part of our country. Talk about insane.

You see, there was probably a big foul up back at the command center in Diliman. All of the people at the registrar's office were getting tipsy, and they managed to press a few buttons, and hey presto! I got sent to Mindanao. (Of course, that's not true. But that was always a good answer to those who kept asking me what the hell I was doing here.) It was probably a bit logical that I study here, since my mom works in Davao, but still.... I had never lived in any other part of the country before, and I didn't know any Bisaya, so basically, I didn't just have to adjust to college, but to the city as well.

And as if to add insult to injury, my mom lived in Lanang at that time, so I had to stay at

the dorm or risk being late for my 7:30 class.



Before school started, I was holding on to this dim hope that someone else from Manila was insane enough (or stoned enough, take your pick) to study in UP Mindanao. It was

futile; I learned during orientation that I was the only one in my batch from Manila. (Whoopie.) Wonderful. During freshman orientation, I was griping. I was stuck in a place that didn't have a roof, included in a circle of people who were all using a language that I couldn't understand, and I hated every minute of it. I wanted to be back home, with my friends, probably studying at Ateneo de Manila. Talk about orientation: I was more lost here than ever before. But with the help of tentative friends and a mother who was more a geographic hindrance than assistance, I managed to find my way around the campus. Mind you, it's not as easy as riding the Ikot jeep.

"Walking around UP Mindanao, one was treated to either an awesome display of nature's enormity or a test of endurance."

For starters, there were no proper roads going to the campus – taxi drivers always blanched whenever I would tell them that my destination was the Mintal campus of UP Mindanao. (FYI, there are two campuses of UP Mindanao: the Terraza campus, which is located in the downtown Davao area, and is the home of the School of Management; and the Mintal campus, which is in the outskirts of the city and where the undergraduates are.) So the main mode of transportation is the habal-habal, or the HH: a motorcycle with an extended behind. The first time I rode one, I was hanging on to my seat for dear life. Most HH drivers are wannabe-BMX drivers, and the speed is enough to make one feel as if the vehicle was in hyperdrive. To add insanity to the whole experience, think of 10-15 minutes of such a ride with no protective equipment whatsoever, over rough terrain that was called the Abortion Road because of the gigantic slabs of stone that littered the narrow dirt road. Thus, most UP Min students graduate losing their virginity on that rough ride. After a few months of riding the HH, I became adept enough to ride without holding onto anything; it was a virtuoso performance of the balancing kind, and I was pretty proud of myself.



The campus itself was around 200 hectares – bigger than UP Diliman by a stretch.

We were bordered by the Philippine Coconut Authority on one side (so we also had a Philcoa) and the 55th Engineering Brigade of the Philippine Army on the other. However, most of the UP Mindanao lands were farms, horse ranches, or stretches of wild talahib. We only had four buildings: the Elias B. Lopez Hall, which was the girls' dormitory; the Administration/College of Humanities and Social Sciences building; the College of Science and Math building; and the UP Mindanao Cultural Center. The boys' dormitory was on Philcoa land, and was aptly dubbed as the PCA dorm. We had about one mile of concrete stretching from the entrance of the 55th Brigade to the entrance of EBL dorm, and that was the extent of our road. Luckily, it was easy to walk from building to building – at least in terms of distance. As there were no need for sidewalks (since there were no roads to begin with), we were at the mercy of squelchy dirt paths that became mud and dirt soup when it rained.

Walking around UP Mindanao, one was treated to either an awesome display of nature's enormity or a test of endurance. Most of our well-trodden paths took us from the EBL dorm (which also doubled as our main canteen and mini-version of the Shopping Center) towards the Admin building. The paths were usually under the sweltering heat of the midday sun. While it took us less than five minutes to get from one building to the next, it depended on the weather as to the general condition of one's shoes and disposition. If it was sunny, the dust tended to get into one's

shoes. If it was raining, then it was mud. If the carabaos were let loose, then it was usually shit. If one was careful, then minimal damage was sustained.

The nature part was simple: the skies were usually the blue of the ocean, and Mount Apo loomed in the shadowy distance. Around us were sparse shrubs and the occasional tree, as well as a profusion of goats, big and small, the carabaos and cows of the nearby farms – we even saw a snake one time, which the HH drivers killed for sport.



Nevertheless, the campus housed a tight-knit community of students, faculty, and administration officials.

Most of the students were on a first-name basis, and we all knew the secretaries and assistants by faces, if not by names. Teachers were just neighbors or dorm parents – the small community afforded us a semblance of a family. And while the inconvenience of studying in the boondocks of Davao was the foremost complaint of most people, we made do with what we had, and suffered the inconveniences of the location and the dormitory just for the sake of getting a UP education.

This is probably what made me proud of studying at UP Mindanao: that despite the lousy roads (what roads?) and the heat and the cow dung, we lived through the experience of freshman year at UP Mindanao, emerging unscathed and with a newfound respect for our own tolerance and survival skills. What doesn't kill you will make you stronger, and those studying at the UP Mindanao campus, forging a path through the thickets and brambles of a young UP campus, will attest to that.

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