



Tom Hawthorn

After violence in the Philippines, a refugee thrives in her new home

The morning routine on a school day at the Claver home operates like clockwork.

The father, Constancio, known as Chandu, rises before dawn, cleans up, puts rice on the stove.

At 5:55, he begins trying to wake the youngest of his three daughters. Alex, 12, gets to use the lone bathroom until 6:30, when it is turned over to 15-year-old Sandy.

Everyone comes to the table at 7 a.m., when the father serves a traditional Filipino breakfast of eggs and garlic fried rice with a bit of meat or fish.

Then, the eldest daughter, Samantha, 17, gets the use of the bathroom before heading off to catch the 7:55 bus to Victoria High School.

After the girls are off to classes, Mr. Claver walks for a half-hour to his 10-hour shift as a client service worker at an emergency homeless shelter.

He arrived in Canada four years ago with what remained of his family. As a refugee, he expected hardships.

“I knew that before I came,” he said.

He knows his girls miss cousins and friends back in the homeland they left so unexpectedly.

Last week, the family’s routine was altered. Samantha, a Grade 12 student, travelled to Vancouver where she received an award of excellence from Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond, B.C.’s representative for children and youth.

The teenager has been active in two stage productions – *Where is Home* and *My Forbidden Disorder* – in which youth share their immigrant experiences. As well, she has helped develop

programming for Project Respect, a program to help youth avoid being victims of sexual violence.

The press release announcing her award describes her coming to Canada “as a result of fear and violence in her home country.”

That does not begin to tell the tale.

On July 31, 2006, while Samantha was attending a Girl Scout gathering in South Korea, her parents went about an ordinary morning in their home of Tabuk, a rice-growing centre and capital of Kalinga province in the northern Philippines. Her father, a medical doctor, supervised several health clinics for which his wife, Alyce, kept the books. The couple had met while promoting social justice for local indigenous people, whose poverty the doctor believed was responsible for many of their recurring illnesses.

The couple had just dropped off Alex at her school and were on their way to Sandy’s school when they were attacked at a busy intersection.

“We were cut off by a van,” Mr. Claver recalled. “Two riflemen came out and started shooting at the car. One on my left, one on my right. It happened so fast.”

A shot tore into his left shoulder. He ducked to his right, seeking cover beneath the dashboard. His wife, Alyce, sitting in the passenger seat, also ducked, covering his body with hers.

In the back seat, Sandy cowered as low as she could go.

The shots kept coming.

“We were thinking they would come and finish us off,” he said.

Instead, the gunmen fled in their van.

Later, 38 cartridge cases would be found on the roadway.

The doctor bled profusely from the shoulder wound. His wife was struck by seven bullets, grievously wounded, though still able to talk. Sandy suffered a grazing head wound.

The parents were rushed to surgery. Mr. Claver remembers hearing his wife calling relatives on a cellphone, urging them to take care of the daughters.

“I made it,” he said. “She didn’t.”

The shooting was a high-profile case in the Philippines, where government agents with ties to the military were suspected of the attack. More than 900 Filipinos have been the victims of extra-judicial killings in the past decade.

The doctor stayed in safe houses after the attack, but received a warning that his daughters were in danger.

Mr. Claver quickly arranged what everyone was told was to be an extended holiday. He did not tell the girls that he planned on seeking refugee status after arriving in Canada. Once here, the daughters discovered in his luggage a Philippine cookbook. The secret was out. This was to be more than a visit.

The family received refugee status, becoming permanent residents.

Mr. Claver, unable to practice medicine here, took a janitorial job with the Cool Aid Society. He found a two-bedroom home to rent, taught himself to cook, attentively monitored his daughters' progress at school.

News of Samantha's latest honour was warmly received.

"It brings great satisfaction," Mr. Claver said. "It shows they're fitting in. For myself, it was a big worry, having to transplant them suddenly to Canada. They were never prepared for this.

"It's a good sign."

As for Samantha, she plans to become a doctor. Like her father.

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