

Paul zaiser: a tribute

Ron Furth reflects on his friendship with former colleague Paul Zaiser '75

When Dan Swanson called to tell me that Paul Zaiser '75 had passed away, I was stunned. Although I had said goodbye to Paul in Tokyo in 1994 when I moved back to the US, we had stayed in touch and made vague plans to visit each other. Finally, in February 2003, I traveled to the Philippines to spend a week with Paul. He was in good spirits, looked healthy, and was excited about his future plans. He was only 45, engaged to marry his long-time Filipina partner Cherry, and was ready to return to Tokyo after spending the past seven years in the Philippines. A new teaching job and marriage beckoned and Paul was the happiest I'd ever seen him. When I said goodbye, I boarded the plane with the image of Paul's beaming smile in my memory.

I was fortunate to teach at ASU with an outstanding social studies department; Dick Gallagher, Gary Fish, Dan Swanson and Paul. Each helped me to adjust to life in Japan, and each contributed to making my four years at ASU among the best of my career. Dick shared his knowledge of Japanese culture and history, Gary expanded my repertoire of country music, Dan taught me the intricacies of sumo, and Paul introduced me to the incredible music scene in Tokyo and showed me how to get around the city. Asking Paul how to get to a concert venue, be it Nakano Sun Plaza or small clubs in Kawasaki, was an awesome experience. Paul would not only tell me what trains to take, assuring that I caught the fastest express, but he also told me which car to enter so that the door would open at my stop with the stairs directly in front of me so that I could run up the stairs and catch the connecting train before its doors shut. Paul's directions never failed me. Paul also introduced me to dozens of bands that enriched my life and after my week on Mactan in February, I boarded the plane, with a half dozen new titles on my must-purchase list.


Paul was more than an amazing tour guide with a stunning knowledge of modern music. He was a person who dedicated his life to helping others. ASU alumni and readers of the *ambassador* are familiar with Paul's Philippine Relief Organization and the Buyong Sponsorship Program, but only those who have visited Mactan Island can fully understand what Paul and his family meant to the Buyong community. Paul was known by the entire community and was regularly hailed on our daily outings. However, Paul was never comfortable with the adulation, wanting to be accepted as a member of the community, albeit an extraordinarily helpful one. Paul's promotion of the Buyong Sponsorship Program was never for personal gain, but rather to achieve greater support for the program and the people of the Buyong area. Through the selfless efforts of Paul, his mother Janet, and many others, thousands have benefited over the past 20 years. Seven hundred free breakfasts were served daily to the students at Buyong Elementary School. Computers were donated to the school and students were taught basic computer skills. For the past few years the program for the school's graduation was designed and produced by the students, under Paul's guidance. Each year, two graduating high school students from Buyong receive scholarships to local colleges. Throughout the past 20 years, the community's infrastructure — sanitation facilities, new buildings, electricity, new medical clinics — steadily improved. When a typhoon devastated Buyong in 1984, the Buyong Sponsorship Program helped to raise money to replace roofs and repair damage throughout the village. The achievements of the program have been truly monumental, in large part due to Paul's efforts.

One story reveals something about Paul's personal involvement with the Buyong community. A group of American doctors visits the nearby island of Cebu once a year to perform free cleft palate operations. Paul and I spent a long, hot day at a clinic in Cebu with a mother from Buyong and her 2-year-old son in order for the child to have the surgery. The lines formed shortly after dawn and the bureaucratic roadblocks were formidable, yet Paul maintained his cool and calmly guided the young mother and her child through the process. When the doctors determined that the child was anemic and could not have the operation the mother was crushed, but Paul refused to be deterred. He met with the doctors to determine what needed to be done so that the child would be ready for the next time the clinic offered the cleft palate operations, he checked with the hospital to be sure that the child's records were correct, and made sure that the family would not have to go through the same ordeal next year. Paul bought a supply of iron supplement powdered milk for the child and carefully explained the instructions to the mother. I returned to Paul's house that evening drained from the exhausting day, but touched by Paul's humanity. Although Paul will not be in Buyong next February when the clinic returns, thanks to Paul's efforts the child will still have the surgery.

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Paul was a unique person. Not everybody was comfortable with his non-traditional dress style — he wore a different Grateful Dead T-shirt each day of the week I was with him in February — or his close, mutually respectful, relationship with students. But Paul was a mentor for hundreds of students who were drawn to those qualities that made Paul unique. I spent four years watching Paul nurture, support and stimulate students who might have otherwise not found an adult with whom they could comfortably discuss the issues that were vital to them. Every school needs a Paul Zaiser, and ASIJ was fortunate to have had the real deal.

Like many ASU students, Paul was a third culture kid. His family moved to Nagoya in 1969, then Tokyo in 1975, where Paul lived until he left ASU and moved to Mactan in 1996. Although Paul's parents moved to Olympia, WA, where they still reside, and Paul had a cabin at Lake Nojiri in Nagano prefecture that he returned to annually, I always sensed that Paul was a man without a country. Perhaps that is why Paul seemed so at peace at Buyong, because he finally felt that he had found a home. He had known Cherry and her family for a long time and looked forward to becoming a member of her family. My one consolation to Paul's passing is that he was excited about his life and looked forward to his new job and pending marriage. I believe that Paul died a happy man.

The social studies department used to joke about the practice that many schools have of naming buildings after past administrators. We would kid Dick Gallagher that when he retired there would be a Dick Gallagher Memorial Broom Closet. Although Paul would have been the first to reject any notion of a tribute, he is deserving of one. I would propose renaming the Philippine Relief Organization as the Paul Zaiser Fund. Students could add a stack of Grateful Dead T-shirts to the weekly bake sale in order to raise funds. This small gesture would remind future ASU students that one person with a big heart can make a difference in the lives of others. Paul Zaiser is gone, but many of us will think of him every time we listen to new music or consider helping those less fortunate. Paul made many of us better people. 

To learn more about the work of Paul Zaiser's Buyong Sponsorship Program see <www.buyong.org>.

On December 3, 2003, the Philippine Relief Organization held a charity bingo game. In total, ₱168,800 was raised for the PRO's daily elementary school lunch program, meaning that 700 pupils in Buyong can be provided with lunch for 90 days. Thank you to everyone who provided prizes and participated.

Ron Furth, former faculty member (1990-94), is currently embarking on a writing career and is currently completing his first novel.

