



WARD WURM, a 1980 Decatur Community High School graduate, has worked off and on for environmental groups in the Philippines to help replant deforested areas, minimize erosion and experiment with crops that could bring

in more money for native farmers. One of the obvious differences between his culture and theirs, Mr. Wurm said, was height: He posted with the men of the village, some of whom were older than him.

Oberlin native travels the world

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While many have graduated from Decatur Community High and gone on to success, few have gone farther than Ward Wurm, a 1980 grad.

After graduating from Kansas State University in 1985 with a degree in mechanical engineering, Mr. Wurm got a job in 1993 working on aircraft fueling systems, which landed him, among other places, in a tiny peninsula in the Middle East called Qatar. And that led him, eventually, to a volunteer job helping native people in the Philippines.

Needless to say, Qatar was about as far away from Oberlin as a young man could find himself, a Muslim country on the Arabian peninsula with customs far different than ours. Case in point: One day, Mr. Wurm decided to explore the big city park.

“So there’s a little pond there with some fish, and I step off the sidewalk and walk a couple yards and sit on the rocks to look at the fish, and there were some ducks there, so I was just chilling out. And this little Indian guy walks up to me with a security jacket on and says, ‘Sir, not allowed.’

“And I’m like, whatever, I’m sitting on rocks by the pond and I guess he’s afraid I’m going to fall in or something. So I get up and move and walk somewhere else, and then I sit under the trees on some grass, and I’m just sitting there, and another little Indian security guard walks up and says, ‘Sir, not allowed.’ And I’m thinking, Jeez, do I have to sit on a bench or something like that? So I leave.

“And they have some unusual trees there, called Baobab trees, with big wide

trunks and little tiny crowns, and I decide I’m going to take some pictures of them. So I go back the next week, and I wake up early so I don’t have people in the background and there’s good light. I get there at about 9 a.m. and nobody’s at the park. So I’m taking pictures at various angles and stuff, and sure enough, a little Indian guy walks up to me and says, ‘Sir, not allowed.’

“And I’m like, ‘What do you mean? I’m going to take pictures if I want to.’ And I go back to taking pictures. And pretty soon, here comes him and a bigger Indian guy, who is obviously his supervisor. He walks up to me and says, ‘Sir, you’re not allowed here, you’re not allowed.’ And I say, ‘What do you mean? I’m taking pictures, big deal.’ And he says, ‘No sir, you’re a bachelor, you’re single and you’re not with anyone else. This is a family park and you’re not allowed here.’

“Single males were not allowed in the park. That’s what they were trying to tell me, but they didn’t have the words to explain it. So yeah, that was pretty much a perfect example of culture shock.

“In the Philippines, it was like anything goes; it didn’t matter to a fault. But in Qatar, nothing goes.”

In Qatar, Mr. Wurm, an engineer with the Kansas City-based firm Burns and McDonnell, spent much of his time working on a new international airport. The country, mostly barren desert, had no city to speak of until about a generation ago, he said. Almost any Qatari man’s grandfather rode a camel and lived in a tent, up until the world’s largest natural gas deposit was found beneath the puny country, and almost overnight, it became



QATAR is a middle-eastern country found on a peninsula of Saudi Arabia. It’s native population is about 100,000, and most of the land is barren desert.

home to one of the richest in the world. This has also turned it into one of the most modern and fastest-growing cities in the world. With a native population of only around 100,000 people, he said, the wealth is distributed liberally.

The other 900,000 people who live in Qatar are mostly foreign workers, he said, many of them Muslims from India and the Philippines. When the island country suffered a devastating volcanic explosion in the 90s, many of its poorest indigenous people were displaced. And when it was then hit by

five typhoons in 2008, it was truly desperate for help, which is how Mr. Wurm found out about the Pacific nation and its needs.

There were clothing drives all over Qatar for the Philippines, he said, because so many Filipinos work there as nannies, nursemaids and servants.

“The native people don’t have much at all,” he said. “The Philippines isn’t a rich country to begin with, so they really need all the help they can get.

“Working (in Qatar), I got kind of fed up with how things were going. So after I finished up, I wanted to do something environmental, because Qatar is so boring and industrial, and I just wanted to do something else.

“With the Philippines, well, some history is good for background. They’ve been pretty much stomped on by everyone else that’s been there. After World War II, they were about 80 percent forested... By 1960, it was down to 50 percent forested. So there are all these barren slopes, and I’ve been working with a group to reforest them. But it’s tough, because the soil is really bad there, which is also why I helped set up some experimental crop areas, to see if the natives could grow more valuable crops, like coffee, cocoa and macadamia nuts.”

Mr. Wurm said he supports a Filipina girl through school, which only costs him a dollar a day, but is a big deal to her family.

“They’re mostly subsistence farmers out there,” he said, explaining that some of the indigenous people spend every day just trying to gather enough food to eat. “They have very little. They might take 10 percent of their bananas to the market, maybe, to get cigarettes or something. But for the most part, it’s hand to mouth.

“The native used to live in the mountains, but when it erupted in the 90s, they were forced out. For various social reasons, they’re looked down upon by the others, and they really don’t have the wherewithal to drive a taxi or work in a store. So they’re basically share croppers who help with the rice harvest.”

Mr. Wurm said he helped plant 500 mangrove trees to reforest and prevent erosion in a beach area where he worked. At the end of the day, he said, he could have just given those Filipinos at the clothing drives some money. But he wanted to do more.

“They’re really nice people,” he said, “and they really get kind of shafted (in Qatar). They work long hours and don’t get paid. Qataris basically look down on them and treat them like slaves.

“They have no legal recourse for a problem at all. If they have (a problem), they can go to their embassy and file a complaint. And the Qataris will file it somewhere, and that’s it. They don’t care. I really felt bad for them; they were really getting screwed over.”



QATAR AND THE PHILIPPINES are about as different as two countries can get, Mr. Wurm said. In the principal city of Doha (left), all of the skyscrapers have been built in the last eight years. They strike an interesting contrast with

the traditional Arab population, represented here by three women wearing the Abayah dress. In the Philippines, the native population is poor, jolly and pay little attention to time or fashion. Mr. Wurm (right) worked primarily by planting



over 500 mangrove trees in the swampy land alongside native villages.

Photos by Ward Wurm