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## From the streets of Manila to the Eberswalde Forest

Katrin Hartmann

Posted at Nov 18 2018 12:48 AM | Updated as of Nov 18 2018 01:30 PM

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University of the Philippines-Diliman student Gino Carlo Garcia. *Jeffrey Hernaez*

MANILA – Gino Carlo Garcia doesn't stand out in Manila. He pins his raven-black hair backwards with a hair clip and his white teeth flash with every smile.

At the University of the Philippines Diliman (UP) in Quezon City, he resembles every other student. And yet, many things are different for the 33-year-old. Sitting on a bench at UP, he observes the students lying on the grass having a good time in the park. It's the first time he's seen his home in two years.

"It's funny to be here again", he says in German with almost no accent.

He has spent the past 24 months in Eberswalde – a small town in Germany located in the forest. "A completely different world", he says.

There, Gino is studying at the [Hochschule fuer nachhaltige Entwicklung](#) (HNE) – the University for Sustainable Development.

Within his studies, he focuses on Global Change Management.

He has just finished collecting data for his Master's thesis in Manila. "The past two months went over too fast. I didn't have enough time to see all the people I wanted to see", he says.

While studying, he experienced many things that were new to him.

For example, for the first time in his life he was able to touch snow. "I was scared", he says, but then laughs putting back his hair again. "I had only seen snow in blockbuster movies. Snow – for me, it always entailed a storm or another catastrophe. It's uncanny how this image has shaped me". After all, it was a new experience for the student, who is surrounded by a gentle and humble aura.

Gino also suffered a cultural shock after his arrival in Germany. Suddenly he was faced with exclusively white faces, plenty of rain, cold, and little rice.

However, the warmth returned quickly, thanks to a sincere welcome at the university.

"I wasn't the only one who was new at the HNEE. I didn't expect it, but it was very easy to find friends and a shared room", he says.

A big brother program at the university helped him overcome the bureaucratic hurdles of everyday life and understand public transport.

At the same time, things were rumbling on the other side of the globe in his homeland, particularly close to his birthplace of Iligan City on Mindanao.

The images of the Marawi war are still deeply engraved in the memory of many Filipinos: bombs, gunfire, deaths, injuries, hostages, destroyed buildings, people without shelter and belongings. For that, Gino could only follow the news. A lot of things pattered on the young Filipino: his first year in Eberswalde, the troubles back home, the agitation within himself.

Before, Gino was part of the peacebuilding process. Participating in a project initiated by the President's Bureau, on several occasions, he had travelled to the conflict-ridden region.

Together with other project workers, Gino logged violent incidents and destruction and sent assessments back to Manila.

"It's sad, but the conflict became daily work for me", he says still looking at the students in the park. "Manila was a different world to me."

He was hardly allowed to take a single step without a military escort. One experience allowed him to profoundly grasp the harsh reality of the conflict.

"The mayor of one of the affected cities was killed by rebels. A short while later I met his widowed wife. The whole situation upset me". He pauses searching for another word, "And it made me very mad. Everything seems to be political somehow".

"My family is very proud of me. It's a very special thing for Filipinos to study in Germany". For the time being, as the second Philippine student at the HNE Eberswalde, he is concentrating on his degree now. A scholarship from the Heinrich Böll Foundation helped him to finally realize his dream.

After helping to clean up after typhoon Washi in 2011 on behalf of the German Society for International Cooperation (GIZ), Gino met his predecessor Kay Kristine Alave.

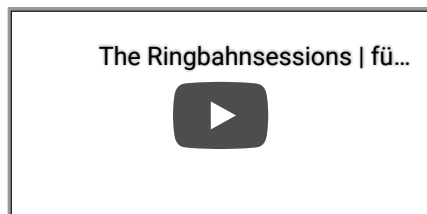
"Kay told me about the degree course. I couldn't let go of the thought. Even in the jungles of Mindanao, I was constantly thinking about how to get to Eberswalde".

Especially after the impact of the typhoon, he was inspired by the idea of learning at a school that focuses on environmental change.

Around 40 percent of the students enrolled in Eberswalde come from other countries, 60 percent from Germany. "A great mix", says Gino.

All of them are concerned by one topic: sustainability. Some of the environmental issues raised during his studies have left him feeling disillusioned.

"Certain topics are frustrating. It's frightening how many people have no idea of environmental problems". To change that, Gino and other students publish a Vlog on YouTube interviewing experts in the Berlin S-Bahn – a train line that circles around the German capital. The aim is to create more awareness for environmental issues and change in that matter.



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Concerning pollution and emissions, Gino immediately thinks of Metro-Manila's biggest problem: the traffic.

One scene is repeatedly seen on the streets everyday: Bumper to bumper, cars, buses, scooters, trucks and other vehicles are crawling across the main traffic routes at a snail's pace, wrapped in a thick cloud of exhaust fumes.

In his final thesis, the Master's student will address the introduction of an environmental tax in the Philippines – a tax on carbon, plastics, waste and others.

Is it feasible? Gino isn't sure yet. "I'm not the first person to have ideas about this. Ultimately, a lot depends on political processes." If he could import anything from Germany to the Philippines he'd choose the public transport system and cycling culture. "I've already convinced two of my friends in Manila to ride their bikes every day."

Gino still isn't sure what will happen after he graduates. However, he intends to make the most of the visa, which will allow him to stay in Germany for another 18 months. One thing is certain: Environmental issues will continue to concern him. Perhaps for Gino they will become a gateway between the island paradise and the Eberswalde forest. With his background, he certainly has the best prospects to achieve this.

\*This article was written as part of the Goethe-Institut's Close-Up journalists' exchange program. More information can be found at [www.goethe.de/nahaufnahme](http://www.goethe.de/nahaufnahme) and at [#goethecloseup](#).

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