

# Mark Espina's inspiring 7000-mile journey into social care in Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland

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***“If you have a caring heart, this work is incredibly rewarding. You’ll grow, and you’ll be making a real difference.”***

Mark Espina, a 29-year-old social care practitioner based in Antrim, began his career in healthcare back home in the Philippines, where he studied nursing at university. Little did he know that would lead him to pursuing a career in social care in Northern Ireland.

Mark is influenced by his family, especially his mother and brother, who encouraged him to pursue the nursing field. He enrolled straight after high school and studied for four years, beginning practical experience in hospitals during his second year. These placements gave him exposure to various care settings, including the Accident and Emergency department, operating rooms and other areas.

Despite his progress, Mark was unable to complete his nursing degree when life took an unexpected turn. “I had to leave

university due to a few life changes,” he explains. “Around the same time, both of my parents became ill. So, I stepped in to care for them full-time.” It was a deeply personal experience, but one that ignited a spark. “Looking after them at the end of their lives opened my eyes to what caring really meant—it was hard, but it was also meaningful. That’s when I started thinking about a career in care work more seriously.”

Mark’s brother had already been living in Northern Ireland for over a decade and was married to a nurse who had been working here since the early 2000s. It was his brother and sister-in-law who suggested that he come here, and introduced him to opportunities in social care, specifically at Hutchinson Care Homes.

## **The challenges and rewards of dementia care**

Mark has now been working for Hutchinson Care Homes for nearly three years. He is based at Massereene Manor in Antrim, in their dementia care unit. Hutchinson Care Homes operates several care homes across the region, offering a range of services including residential, nursing, and dementia care. Mark's unit cares for 15 residents, all of whom are elderly and living with dementia.

A typical day involves providing personal care, preparing meals, and engaging those who live there in different kinds of activities. Mark's main goal is to support residents and help make their daily lives more manageable and enjoyable.

Dementia care, Mark notes, is not easy. "It's a very challenging field. Residents can see their personalities change as the condition progresses. You need to have compassion, patience, and understanding and listen to them and their family's needs." But the rewards, he says, are just as real. "It's the small moments – when a resident remembers your name, or when their family give an encouraging comment about the care you're giving – that really does stay with you."

Mark has built strong bonds with many of the residents and enjoys listening to them describe their early lives and childhood. Their stories, often humorous or touching, bring joy to his day and reinforce the value of the connections he makes.

## **The differences between social care here and at home**

Social care in the Philippines, Mark notes, is quite different. While there are government-run facilities and some care services for people who need support, the focus tends to be more on financial assistance programmes and support for low-income families. Residential care, especially for the elderly and people with disabilities exists, but is less developed compared to what he has experienced here in Northern Ireland.

### **Finding a new home**

Mark speaks highly of his experience working with Hutchinson Care Homes, where he feels welcomed and supported. "The staff here, my colleagues, the managers, even HR, have been so friendly and approachable. It's been a really positive experience for me," he says.

The transition to life in Northern Ireland was more emotionally challenging than socially, as leaving behind family and friends in the Philippines was difficult. But he has since made a home for himself here, feels comfortable in his surroundings, and has no plans to leave. "It was a big step," Mark admits. "I was more worried about leaving my friends and family than anything else. But once I arrived, I was so relieved that I had found a place that felt welcoming."

His story is also a testament to the importance and value of diversity in the social care sector. "As someone from the Philippines, I've felt respected and

included here. It shows how important it is for workplaces, especially in care, to be diverse and open.”

### A message for others

Mark encourages others from diverse backgrounds living in Northern Ireland who are considering social care as a career, to take the leap. “It’s a big decision, but it’s worth it, he said. If

you have a caring heart, this work is incredibly rewarding. You’ll grow, and you’ll be making a real difference.”

In a sector often overlooked, voices like Mark’s shine a light on the dedication and diversity that keep it going. His story shows how personal sacrifice and adapting to a new culture can come together, proving that care and compassion have no boundaries.

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