

## **Promoting world peace: one kindergarten at a time.**

### **The Popondetta Project**

In late 2007, Oro Bay in the northern province of PNG was hit by a cyclone and tsunami. People living on the coast fled to higher ground towards the Owen Stanley Mountains, only to become trapped by mudslides. Roads, bridges, homes, schools and crops were all washed away and there was also considerable loss of life. Aid was provided by the Australian, New Zealand and British governments to help the people to rebuild their lives. The children of the rural village of Poro languished at home for the ensuing two years, until senior Oro woman and ICW colleague, Olivia Bunari, decided to build an elementary school for her village children aged 7-12 years.

An elder donated a piece of land backing on to a little stream and fronting Oro Bay Road, which had originally been an American airforce supply base during WW11. A governing board was set up, materials purchased and two village couples constructed two classrooms over an existing, badly creaked concrete base. Enrolments were called for and 100 children aged from 3 to 13 years turned up. The only available educational materials consisted of 2 old blackboards, some white chalk and a few donated library books. An Australian franchise supplied some minimally trained teachers, but when they were not paid due to the lack of fees being paid by the largely subsistence farming community, they were withdrawn.

Undeterred, Olivia recruited 7 volunteers (Year 12 PNG graduates) and asked me to come to attend the official opening of the school, to train the volunteers and to demonstrate early childhood teaching pedagogy. In July, 2010 I travelled to Popondetta and lived with Olivia in her Poro Village home. On the Opening Day, all the children and their families came to school to attend the opening and blessing by Father Jacobsen from the Church of the Holy Cross in Popondetta. Led by dancers and musicians in traditional dress, the official party processed down the path into the playground and up onto the dais. The MC welcomed everyone, outlined the program and then the speeches began. Olivia and the School Committee President outlined their vision for the future and thanked the parents for their cooperation.



The children then performed assembly items for the guests while I congratulated Olivia and her team for their outstanding vision and initiative and the community for their hard work and cooperation in meeting their children's need to have access to education (MDG2). Father Jacobsen then gave his sermon and the children performed assembly items, before he blessed the school and cut the ribbons to declare Crispins Kindergarten officially open. Following the official ceremony, we all sat down together and enjoyed a feast supplied by the parents.



The next day, the training of 7 volunteers was commenced. On the dining table in the outdoor eating area, we covered the topics of Principles and practices of ECE; Duty of care; Planning the learning environment; Child Development 3-8 years; Appropriate strategies and learning experiences to meet developmental needs; Developing language and literacy; and Music, music, music. A program was drawn up for the second week with each volunteer taking responsibility for a different learning centre each day. However, the big challenge was to find sufficient materials in the environment to provide 6 or 7 learning centres appropriate to the 50 young children aged 3- 6 years.



In order to cover the huge creaks in the floor and to mark out the learning centres, we cut down palm leaves and wove traditional palm mats. Four stationery packs that I had taken with me



provided paper, coloured pencils and crayons for the drawing centre, whilst two newspapers I had bought provided the materials for folding paper hats and aeroplanes. A small group played my conservation board game entitled, “A walk through the Australian Bush”, while a box of picture books I had taken with me stocked the library corner. Hollow papaya stalks were used as bubble pipes with liquid supplied from my one piece of precious toilet soap for bubble playing. Recycled coconut shells, sticks, bamboo bongos and plastic container shakers were used for musical instruments and palm leaves were used for the weaving of balls, windmills, toy watches and baskets. Later I was able to buy some flour and salt to make play dough but felt guilty about using precious food as a play thing.



The lack of availability of play/educational materials in rural PNG is a real challenge! On my return to Australia, I collected materials and shipped 3.8 cubic metres of stationery and craft materials, puzzles, reading and library books, tables and stools, video materials and teaching resources to Popondetta, but clearly the expense involved does not make this a sustainable project. Donations from OMEP WA and NCWWA enabled the purchase of a freshwater tank so the children would have clean water to drink, as well as materials to build accommodation for the teachers who are kept but receive no salary. It is of vital importance to provide incentive for these voluntary teachers to continue. Therefore, OMEP WA and NCWWA have combined forces to raise the funds to provide scholarships to bring 3 teachers to Perth in March/April 2012 for educational workshops, school visits and general cultural enrichment. NCWA members are invited to contribute to this important “on the ground” project by making individual donations or holding a specific function to support it.



Dr Dawn Butterworth. (President, NCWWA).