

A week in East Timor



2012 Barry Wood Memorial Grant winner Michael Wright makes a difference for students in East Timor

In 2012 I was fortunate enough to be awarded the Barry Wood Memorial Grant for projects relating to Social Justice in Education.

My proposed project was to spend a week teaching in Marmulak Primary School in the Viqueque area of East Timor. My school, St Ignatius College Geelong, is a member of the Geelong Viqueque Friendship Schools and Marmulak Primary is our designated partner school.

During the 2013 July school break I was fortunate enough to go to East Timor and do exactly that – and more.

Educational facilities in Timor and the Viqueque area are what you would expect in a newly developing country attempting to rebuild after a turbulent and violent past. Buildings are on the whole derelict, often with leaking roofs, holes in the floor, and doors and windows that do not close. School grounds are similarly unkempt, being dusty bowls to muddy quagmires depending on the season. Domestic animals such as dogs and pigs tend to

roam freely. In primary schools students are given lunch (rice and some beans in most cases) which is cooked on site.

Apart from the poor state of facilities, another problem is the lack of qualified teachers and general teaching resources such as readers and texts, also basics such as pens, tape, chalk, stationery, etc. – all the things we take for granted. In fact the staff room at Marmulak was half full of rice sacks rather than teacher and student resources. In 1999 a very large percentage of trained Indonesian primary teachers left the country and as yet they have not been replaced with equally qualified staff. It is also not uncommon for teachers to simply not attend – this was certainly the case at Marmulak primary.

Having said all this, the students at this school were as keen and as interested in their learning as any young child. The lack of resources and poor state of facilities has not in any way dampened their desire to learn and the hope they possess for a better future for them and their country.

During the time I was there I spent time in all grade levels. In the upper grades I was able to give the students letters that my students had written in Tetum, which also had picture of themselves, their families and pets, and other images of life in Australia. The Timorese students responded with their own letters, written in Tetum, with their own hand drawn pictures. Thanks to the Barry Woods grant I was able to provide all students with crayons and paper to do this task.

In the lower levels, once again thanks to the grant, I was able to provide some large storybooks, which were read to the students, and some class sets of readers, alphabet posters and basic stationary items. One of the most pleasing aspects of this was seeing how their teachers copied our method of demonstrating how to read to students and the enthusiasm they then showed once they were given the opportunity and resources.

I would sincerely like to thank the executive and all members of the IEU for the opportunity to fulfil this project. I feel it was a great success in terms of the

learning and experiences of friendship and support that each party gained from the encounter. Ultimately, by being able to support such projects, we too are able to enrich our lives and the lives of our own students. I know my classes have relished the opportunity to engage in letter exchanges with their Timorese friends.

In finishing I must say that the hope, dreams and optimism for the future the Timorese people possess is truly amazing. One young secondary school student in Dili told me that she and her friends did not have time to socialise as they were the future of their country and as such they must spend their spare time studying, as it's through education that they can provide a future for their people. This young girl also stated she wished to attend University of California but if not successful there then Harvard would do!

Lofty dreams indeed.

Michael Wright
IEU Rep, St Ignatius College

2013 AWARD WINNERS

The 2013 winners of the Barry Wood Social Justice Grant and the Jan Bavinton Memorial Project were announced at the IEU Annual Conference. Each Award of \$3000 is presented to a winner to assist in undertaking a relevant project – the Barry Wood for projects with a social justice focus, and the Jan Bavinton for Education Support members.

Congratulations to Laurie Krepp and the student social justice team at St Therese's School Albion on winning the 2013 Barry Wood Social Justice Grant. The Barry Wood funds will assist

volunteer teachers going to Kuala Lumpur to teach and help run small community schools for Burmese refugees, and to establish fundraising and links between Australian and Burmese students.

Congratulations also to the winner of the 2013 Jan Bavinton Memorial Project, Tim Clifford from Xavier College. Tim is involved in a program that seeks to rehabilitate and reuse superseded computer equipment from the College in Third World countries.

Nominations for the 2014 Awards will be called for in Term 3. More information is available at: www.ieuvictas.org.au

INTERNATIONAL ROUNDUP

In **Algeria**, strike action in the education sector has entered its fourth week, despite increasing efforts by the government to end the action. Three unions covering workers in the sector have been on strike since late January to put pressure on the government to agree to a series of demands around the status of teachers and recruitment. A recent meeting failed to reach an agreement to end the strike, and, as a result, the Ministry may cancel the spring holiday to catch up with missed classes and extend the school year until the end of May 2014. The Government has also declared the strike illegal by a judicial ruling issued in mid-February, and have threatened to dismiss all teachers on strike.

Teachers in the central African country of **Gabon** will continue the strike action of last year and their ongoing struggle to achieve a living wage and improve learning conditions. A large proportion of the country lives in poverty, including teachers, but the government has refused to pay more than the minimum wage to teachers, relying instead on a series of allowances for seniority, housing and transport. These allowances are hard to obtain, and many teachers claim they haven't received a raise in base pay in ten years.

In **Cambodia**, Rong Chhun, the head of the Independent Teachers' Association and the Cambodian Confederation of Unions, was arrested in late January for his involvement in lobbying for the release of fellow unionists and human rights activists arrested in a government crackdown in January. While released the same day, Chhun remains under government investigation for his role in a garment workers' strike and demonstration for a minimum wage increase. This is the latest in a continuing campaign against workers and their representatives by a government that has come under international attention for their non-compliance with international labour laws.

And finally, a court in **Stuttgart, Germany**, has declared the injuries suffered by a teacher when she fell off a bench while dancing in a beer tent on a school trip as 'work-related'. She suffered back injuries and the court found that it was 'normal and socially appropriate' for beer tent visitors to dance on the benches and the teacher would have unduly distanced herself from her students if she had refused to participate. This is not how we remember our school trips...