



MANTEN KONTAKTU

NEWSLETTER

May 2023

GEELONG-VIQUEQUE FRIENDSHIP SCHOOLS

www.geelong-viqueque.com.au

Introduction by Patrice Hall

After having to abandon visits to see our friends in Viqueque and Timor-Leste due to COVID restrictions, it was really wonderful to make the trip back where we were warmly welcomed by many old friends and renew our connections. We noticed many changes: new buildings in Dili, more new school buildings going up in villages along the route, and roadworks all along the way. The trip back from Viqueque to Dili only took 4 hours, not including an amazing coffee stop along the way by the side of the road near Vermasse. However once again the most striking impression was the impact our visit and return had on the village. So many smiling faces happy to see us again! For me personally it was to see the young men I first met in 2005 now proud fathers with their families. They have been away, developed various skills and are now happy to be back in their village contributing to their community. I had thought that this would probably be my last visit, but now think there will be a few more to come! I realised that we underestimate the value of our trips and the support that we have given, not just financial but the friendships we have developed. The Viqueque chickens were glad to see us leave as they were worried they may be next on the evening meal!



Christian College Geelong Visit by Graham Barton

We landed in Dili on 8 April after a 4 year absence due to covid – CCG staff members Graham Barton (Barto), Andy Phillips, Lee Stringer, Craig White, Michael Lewis and Michelle Anderson, along with Jill and Rod Mayes, Patrice Hall and Jocelyn McMillan, who all have a passion for Timor-Leste. Our destination - the municipality of Viqueque, about 180kms from Dili and a 6 hour drive on rough roads, going for kilometres at a time in second gear.

Prior to the pandemic, CCG Yrs 11-12 students were given the opportunity to visit Viqueque and some of the schools in the area and participate in the kindergarten, IT and English language programs at Uma Maun Alin (Friendship House). The 2023 teacher trip was about re-establishing relationships with a view to having students return in 2023 or 24. We took over a large number of resources, including books, laptops, sports equipment, stationery and musical instruments. The highlight was seeing the huge number of Viqueque locals who were absolutely thrilled to see us back and welcoming the three first-timers – Lee, Craig and Michelle - like they were family. After happy tears, hugs and cuddles with babies, the 'work' began when we were welcomed into 2 kindergartens, 5 schools and several English classes (where it was great to see children as young as 8 wanting to learn English in their free time). We spent time beautifying CCG's accommodation building, Uma Ki'ik (little house) with some fresh paint, assisted by some amazing local boys who wanted to be involved and give back.

Every day the local kids would pop in for a game of soccer, jump rope or colouring in. A highlight was seeing them take to cricket with enthusiasm. Craig is contemplating a future career as the Timor-Leste Women's Cricket Coach... we saw some pure, natural talent in our front (gravelly) yard. We ate incredibly well, enjoying fresh eggs and paun (bread rolls) filled with locally grown tomato and cucumber every day. The two local restaurants spoiled us every night with fried chicken, fresh fish, noodles, rice, fruit and vegetables including the favourite kankun (spinach).

The week went too quickly. A farewell dinner with Uma Maun Alin staff and volunteers had us singing and dancing into the night. Returning to Uma Ki-ik we were surprised to see a crowd of local teens and young adults who treated us to a performance, then by more singing and dancing. We were overcome and humbled by this simple yet heartfelt gesture.

Back in Dili, Barto met with 19 young people from Viqueque who are supported by CCG and some private sponsors, enabling them to attend university in the capital. These future doctors, pharmacists, nurses, teachers and engineers are so grateful for this support, with many intending to return to Viqueque once qualified in order to help improve the lives of their friends and family back home. All participants found the trip to be rewarding, exhilarating and exhausting. For some it was their first trip but certainly not their last... others have been more than 20 times. This little place has captured our hearts. Atèlogu (see you soon) Viqueque.



Mariana Da Silva and wife Paulina by Patrice Hall

Their family comprises 6 living children, ranging from 26 to 2 years old, 3 are now in Dili and 3 remain in Viqueque. Mariana has qualifications in Education and is now Deputy Principal at Viqueque1 where Paulina teaches English. Mariano visited Geelong in 2012 with a group of senior teachers and Principals from Viqueque schools sponsored by the Timorese Ministry of Education. He has been the Project Co Ordinator of GVFS since 2012.

The meeting with Mariano and Paulina became a very interesting conversation. GVFS has supported the establishment of 5 libraries including training and facilities at partner schools. The library at Viqueque 1 has moved into a better room and is very well set out and maintained, apart from a few loose or missing ceiling panels! Paulina is very happy with the facility and students are there every day to read, write and do homework. English has improved a lot and there is practice every day. Paulina would like some Australian based lessons as the ones in current use are US based with 'Mom' on every page. They would also like some support with other subjects, eg. Art.

DREAMS: Mariano hopes that the Science laboratory to be set up at SMR and to be utilised by other schools will enable Viqueque students to enter the Science Competition in Dili. He also spoke about the food program. Schools with students Years 1 to Year 9 get 35 cents per day per student for the food program from the Ministry of Education.

Mariano hopes that school gardens can be established to enable better nutrition while promoting and strengthening sustainable agriculture.

The GVF Schools with fences would be his first choices. He also hopes for a computer room at Viqueque 1 and identified a secure room. The school has computer teachers and power but no technician. A dream of 20 laptops, printer, paper and cartridges does not seem unreasonable.

Mariano also stressed the importance of good communication between him and visiting groups to Viqueque, and is very happy to see Geelong visitors returning. (a later conversation with Chris revealed that St Estavao's school has 2 computer technicians)



Local Viqueque Profile by Patrice Hall

Jose Soares 'Aze' DOB 1 February 1983

Hobbies: music, singing, 'old man soccer'

Employment: English teacher at SMR **Family:** married with 3 children

Aze was one of the original band of volunteers who helped a Christian College work party renew the school library roof at Liceu de 4 Setembro (SMR) in 2004. He also helped renovate the abandoned building which became the Community House known as Uma Maun Alin. He was always there with a broom, paintbrush and/or guitar!

How the Geelong connection changed his life

Aze used to drive a mikrolet and repair tyres. He saw volunteering as an opportunity to develop his English as well as benefitting the local community. A mechanics course in Dili was interrupted by civil unrest in 2006 and Aze eventually completed an English degree with private sponsorship from Geelong. He went on to be the Co-ordinator of Uma Alin, visited Geelong in 2011 attending English classes at Diversitat and now teaches English at SMR. He has a deep sense of appreciation for the opportunities that opened up to him through volunteering. It has given many girls and boys the opportunity to speak English, he says. He appreciates and is proud of the connection with Geelong, saying "It's not just a visit." Aze acknowledges it has helped with education, development, GVFS, libraries and scholarships. He hopes "the relationship and friendship is ongoing and the connection never ends." Aze has given back to the community, and those who know him are very proud of what he has achieved.



Circle of Silence review by Rosemary Nugent

On 9 May at the Village Cinema, a full house viewed *Circle of Silence*, a powerful film that investigates the murder of the Balibó Five comprising Shirley's estranged husband, Greg Shackleton, and four other Australian journalists before the Indonesian army invaded in 1975. The investigation into their deaths in Portuguese Timor was discontinued by the Australian Federal Police due to 'insufficient evidence', and so Shirley chose to conduct her own enquiry during which she uncovered new evidence. As the story unravels, the film is confronting as it exposes uncomfortable truths about Australia's involvement in a cover up. Shirley Shackleton was a courageous and determined advocate for justice and transparency. She is the film's co writer and narrator, as well as being its heart and soul. It is a moving and emotional story as Shirley was a courageous and determined advocate for integrity and transparency, dedicating her life to finding answers and justice. She died in January 2023, but did see the film completed. Shirley recognised that the film is an important cultural and historical resource for schools, universities and communities. Profits from screenings in Australia will enable its dubbing into Tetum and help fund screenings to Timor communities in open air cinemas.

Independence Day Celebrations

Timor Leste celebrates the 21st anniversary of its Independence Restoration Day on 20 May. The day has special importance for the people of Timor-Leste because of the decades-long bloody conflict it took to finally achieve independence. AETA (Australia-East Timor Association) also celebrates the day with a dinner to be held in Melbourne on Friday 19 May. Guest speakers will be Ego Lemos, who was recently appointed Goodwill Environmental and Cultural Ambassador by President Horta, and Michael Leach who teaches at Swinburne University in Comparative Politics, and the Politics of the Pacific. Ego Lemos will discuss environmental and social issues affecting Timor-Leste while Michael Leach will discuss the context and significance of the current parliamentary elections.

Geelong Viqueque Friendship Schools group is also celebrating with a dinner to be held on Thursday 18 May. Guest speakers will be the Honorary Consul General to the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste Andrew Mahar AM, and his daughter Alice.



Reflections on a First Visit to Timor in Ten Words

Beauty beyond compare,
Poverty without despair
Smiles on faces everywhere.

Lee Stringer, Christian College teacher, April 2023

Politics in Timor-Leste – an Update

Parliamentary elections will be held in Timor-Leste on 21 May with 17 parties jostling for votes. The key contest will be between Fretilin and Xanana Gusmão's CNRT, but whoever wins the majority is likely to need the help of one of the smaller parties. It is a generational election as the median age has risen from 18 to 21 in recent years with a large percentage voting for the first time. Jose Ramos Horta won the Presidential election in 2022 with 62% of the vote.

Scholarship Program

The scholarship program continues under the guidance of the GVFS Project Co Ordinator Mariano da Silva with 60+ students currently receiving support to continue their education. Chris Hansen from Geelong has attended the award ceremonies which are attended by the students, parents, school administration and Education representatives. Almost all the students come from very poor families and continuation of their education is restricted by their financial circumstances. It is very rewarding to know that we are helping to support the future for these young Timorese. (If you are interested in becoming a donor for 3 years for \$300, please see attached information about the scholarship program, new donors very welcome!)

Viqueque Update

Chris Hansen, retired Deputy Principal of Christ the King Primary School, Newcomb, Geelong, has been a regular visitor to Viqueque since 2010. These are some comments he made in conversation outside Uma Alin, April 2023.

What keeps you coming back? Chris remarked that there is a network of people who want things done to improve life for the people of Viqueque, and he believes that what we are doing is of some value to the people. He has an appreciation of what it takes to get things done and to make a difference. Chris observes that trust has been built up to work in partnership with the people of this district, and now they know it will happen - 'you do come back'. He has seen big changes between boys and girls, girls have a higher profile and are encouraged to be leaders, women can have strong opinions and voices, leaders are educated and strong. There is also a lot of progress in other areas with the airport being rebuilt, the harbour finished, a new hospital being built, the Koreans building a new Paediatric Hospital and a new regional airport being built in Viqueque. In addition, the Chinese are working on the roads with Timorese labour. Chris sees that a long term commitment is needed as change will happen over 2-3 generations.

