



## MANTEN KONTAKTU NEWSLETTER

GEELONG-VIQUEQUE FRIENDSHIP SCHOOLS

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Schools update and news from Viqueque

November 2023

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### Message from Louise Madden, GVFS President

I would like to thank the Committee members for their ongoing work over the past 12 months. Obviously, some do more than others for any number of reasons, but we need to remember why we were formed, what are the purposes of our group and how are we going forward with supporting Viqueque financially and through friendship while allowing our friends their greater self-determination.

I would like to thank David Whelan, our former president, for his help and support while moving into this role. A heartfelt thank you to the Executive – Julie Whelan and Bernie Madden – for their continued support and amazing work over the year.

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### Geelong-Viqueque Friendship Schools' AGM *by Rosemary Nugent*

A successful AGM was held on 8 November hosted by Kardinia International College. Congratulations to the members of the executive who were all re-elected: President Louise Madden, Secretary Julie Whelan and Treasurer Bernie Madden. Congratulations also to those who have offered their time to be general members on the committee.

We were delighted to have **Samuel da Costa**, the coordinator for the Christian College Friendship House in Viqueque, as the guest speaker.

Samuel emphasised that during the pandemic, the people of Viqueque really missed the connection with the people of Geelong. They were excited and really, really delighted when they heard that their friends would be arriving. Now that visits have resumed, he explained how happy it has made them and how much they value this connection.



As co-ordinator of Christian College's Friendship House in Viqueque, Samuel outlined the ways the local community engages with programs to develop skills and build their capacity, including offering computer classes with Akai and running a kindergarten. There are plans to meet the needs of young people by developing their skills over the next five years by offering music and dance classes for girls.

When asked about any challenges faced, Samuel indicated that bureaucracy was increasing, for example the need to gain permission to mend a window. He also spoke of the frustrations of students who work hard on scholarships to go to university but then have difficulty finding a job.

Those attending the meeting were treated to an impromptu performance by Samuel playing the guitar and singing two well-known songs.

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### Scholarship Program *by Louise Madden*

A stated priority of the Timor-Leste government is to keep students at school. The GVFS scholarship program is funded by Geelong schools, organisations and individuals who commit to financial contributions for a 3-year period or longer.

Last year through this program we were able to award 60 scholarships. Thank you to Mariano DaSilva, the GVFS Project coordinator, and Chris Hansen who were able to hold a ceremony presenting the scholarships which was attended by the students, parents, school administrators and Education representatives.

I would like to draw your attention to the dwindling of support for the Scholarship Program in 2023. I do not think we have enough money for 60 scholarships this year, despite emails being sent as reminders a number of times. If this message serves as a reminder, please deposit your donation to the following account, making sure you include your name in the reference.

BSB 633000

Account No. 144110517

Account Name GVFS Scholarship Account

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## Save the Dates in 2024

GVFS will hold a Trivia Night on **Friday 10 May 2024**. We suggest some forward planning – save the date and start organising a table with friends, family, colleagues, neighbours...! You might also have prizes to donate.

In addition, you might be interested in coming along to a committee meeting. The GVFS dates for 2024 are 7/2, 24/4, 28/8 and 30/10 AGM. Venues to be advised.

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## A Visit to Geelong by Margie Beck AM, 12 - 13 October

We were lucky to be able to host Margie Beck AM in Geelong again, this time for two days. Although now recently retired and living in Sydney, Margie is still very connected to Timor-Leste and its people through her ongoing work with the Marist Brothers, helping to support students wishing to study at the college. Margie, a great friend to Timor-Leste and former Vice-Director of Marist Teachers' College in Baucau, continues to co-ordinate an extensive scholarship program.

Margie's first port of call was to a local Geelong West café to catch up with friends, some of whom had enjoyed her hospitality when she was living in Baucau. It was a great opportunity to hear informally about her continuing contact with, and passion for, the people of Timor-Leste. Margie stressed how important the ongoing connections and support are to the Timorese people.



Her school visits were welcomed by the students from different levels of St Joseph's College, Iona College and Clonard College where Margie provided an insightful experience, updating the school communities about life in Timor-Leste and providing an historical context. They learnt about many aspects of life in Timor-Leste with its challenges and joys.

Laura Doherty, who hosted Margie overnight, took our guest to Sacred Heart College where she was a guest speaker at the 2023 Mercy Empowerment Dinner. Margie is still a regular visitor to Timor, doing some curriculum development, overseeing the scholarships, and following up on what her former students are doing. Margie gave an interesting presentation where she spoke about the difference the scholarships can make to the lives of the students at the teachers' college. Sadly, not all graduates are able to obtain paying jobs in education, but that has not stopped some from starting up their own schools or pre-schools, or from continuing to teach without regular pay, such is their commitment to education and its potential to transform lives.



One more engagement was her meeting with Carlene Harlock who works part time at Iona and part time in Melbourne as coordinator of the City of Port Phillip's Friends of Suai. This was a wonderful opportunity for them to meet as they had been corresponding for many years regarding East Timorese issues, and they finally got to meet in person!



Thanks to all teachers, students and supporters who made this visit so successful and worthwhile.

### **Margie's Talks to the Schools** by *Rosemary Nugent*

Timor-Leste became independent from Indonesia in 2002, followed by extensive rebuilding, which included some periods of political unrest and lawlessness. With a population of only 1.3 million, it is a nation with a rich history and culture. However, it is difficult to get around as the roads are not good, although they are continually improving. Other obstacles are a limited employment for school leavers and a lack of infrastructure for the development of industry.

Education is a key to developing the nation. Margie was invited by the Marist Brothers in Melbourne to set up systems at the Baucau Teachers' College in 2002 to enable the training of teachers, with 1,200 having graduated since then. Training has involved setting up a lecture and tutorial system where students can discuss a variety of issues, although traditionally such discussion has not been encouraged. The trainee teachers have prepared presentations and have developed many skills such as how to cater for all abilities and how to use a microscope. They have also learnt more about their own culture to share this knowledge when they start teaching in schools. Another initiative is the introduction of swimming lessons as they could not swim at all.

Margie helped to set up a scholarship program to enable East Timorese to study to become teachers. This year there are 128 on scholarships funded by schools, friendship groups, individuals, and businesses. Many of their parents did not have the opportunity to have an education and so they are very proud of their children, making graduation a very special event.

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### **Iona College Fundraiser** by *Anna Haintz*

Recently Margie Beck, a great friend to Timor-Leste and former Deputy Director of Bacau Teachers College, visited Iona College to speak to some Year 10 and Year 7 students. They heard that Timor-Leste, one of our nearest neighbours, has almost 50% of its population living in multi-dimensional poverty with a low standard of living and a lack of adequate health care and education. To action learning and show commitment to our

neighbours, student leaders sold doughnuts recently, which raised \$300 for learning materials at our newly acquired sister school, St Estevao.



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### SEFOPE NEWS from Octaviano by Chris Hansen

Octaviano, a Civil Engineer graduate from Viqueque who has been supported by Geelong, is now in the seventh month of his "Seasonal Worker" contract in Australia. He recently moved from the Northern Territory, picking watermelons, to Albany, Western Australia, where he is now picking and packing strawberries!

There are 28 East Timorese on the strawberry farm and the work is very different from the watermelon farm in outback Northern Territory! Workers are paid \$1.50 per tray and can earn extra money for packing boxes (punnets) after daily picking. Octaviano can pick about 100 boxes a day! Unfortunately, picking finishes around lunchtime each day or when the strawberries run out. The work is backbreaking, but Octaviano loves competing against his fellow workers in the field for the best result each day.

<https://handasydestrawberries.com.au/our-farm/>

Life in Albany bears no resemblance to life in Douglas Daly, Northern Territory! There are bikes on the strawberry farm and Octaviano loves nothing more than a ride into Albany after work and a snack at Hungry Jack's! He can go to Mass on Sunday mornings and loves living on the coast.

Octaviano's contract will expire on 19 December and so he is now waiting to hear whether he will be sent home or offered a second opportunity to stay and work in Australia.

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### Christian College Geelong – a 20 Year Celebration by Graham Barton

Christian College Geelong, a multi campus K-12 school began its involvement with Timor-Leste at the invitation of Kiwanis International with a dairy established in the Los Palos district in 2002. In 2003 when sister communities were established, Geelong was paired with the district of Viqueque, 180 kms from Dili on the south side of the island, and the school's Friendship Committee was formed. With the work of Geelong and local volunteers a building was transformed into the Geelong Viqueque Friendship House- UMA MAUN ALIN.



In 2023 UMA ALIN is the centre for various community programs, including a registered kindergarten with 71 students currently enrolled, English language classes, computer classes, seminars and workshops. Many young Viqueque volunteers have also passed through, leading to life changing opportunities and experiences.

So, in October 2023 a 20-year celebration with the first Co-ordinator Maria Neves, current co-ordinator Samuel da Costa, Howard Williams, past Chairman of the CCG

Board and dairy farmer, past and current committee members, chairpersons and many other guests who have had the wonderful community of Viqueque touch their hearts, celebrated 20 years of friendship between Christian College Geelong and our nearest International neighbour Timor-Leste.



It was a wonderful night of music performed by Samuel and dancing. Congratulations to Andy Phillips, Darryl, Debbie, Jordan and Maddie Riddle for their outstanding contribution, friendship and relationship with the people of Timor-Leste, particularly Viqueque.

Here's to another great 20 years!

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### **Uamori School Garden Update** *by Patrice Hall*



The Uamori school garden project continues to thrive under the leadership of Jaime de Jesus and his band of enthusiastic volunteers, including the school children. Crops have been harvested and seed collection is happening to provide for future crops.

A second school garden is in the planning stage at Buikarin where a Technical College is being established. Jaime has already worked on establishing a large community garden in Buikarin and once again has the support of a group of volunteers and the local community.



Both gardens are focusing on



permaculture principles of composting, recycling, nutrition, collecting and growing seeds, garden bed design, water conservation and life skills that will never be forgotten. Two more school gardens are also in the planning stages with meetings with the school communities, teachers and Ministry of Education happening.

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### **Mini Perma-Youth Camp report** *by James Palmer*

In late October this year a small group of around 50 young people came together for Viqueque's first mini Perma-Youth camp which was centred around the theme of water and land conservation.



The event was the brainchild of Jaime de Jesus, a local community activist and organiser, and was realised through the work of a small group of 6 volunteers and the surrounding community.

Foin-sa'e Permakultura Viqueque (Permaculture Youth Viqueque) started its work in Viqueque in 2023, with the assistance of GVFS member Patrice Hall, creating a school garden in one of GVFS' partner schools, EBF Uamori. It had been a long time, over six years, since I had been to Viqueque and it was wonderful to have Patrice and Jaime come into the Permaculture Timor-Leste (PERMATIL) office for a surprise reunion, while looking to buy the Tropical Permaculture Guidebook to support the garden project.

After a short explanation to Maun Ego Lemos and the Permatil team of their amazing school garden activities, we invited the group to come along to the Oecusse Perma-Youth camp to build their knowledge and connection with other young activists.

The six participants from Viqueque learned water conservation, sloping agricultural land technology and agriculture conservation. As camp participants in Oecusse, Foin-sa'e Permakultura Viqueque were required to implement their learnings in their villages, and the idea of a minicamp was born. The minicamp was focused on water conservation, by far the most pressing need across Timor-Leste due to climate change, deforestation and the imminent El Nino.



The water conservation technique is centred around watershed rehabilitation, through building water retention ponds, water barriers, reforestation, and community-based land management high above natural springs.

With the support of PERMATIL, Knua Haberan Comunidade (KHC), the Xefe Suku and Xefe Aldeias, the camp happened over three days in October. Participants engaged in water conservation activities, starting with theory around water and land management, followed by field work to survey the land to find the best locations for intervention. The hard work then began with construction of water retention ponds for infiltration of rainwater back into the water table and constructing water barriers for erosion prevention. The final aspect of the camp was in helping participants develop an understanding of virtuous cycles of the environment to reduce deforestation, prevent slash and burn agriculture and protect wildlife. The camp was a great success with the Major General Domingos Raul "Falur Rate Laek" visiting the site for the closing ceremony in support of the community's efforts and the 'new struggle for independence'.

With the support of local authorities, Foin-sa'e Permakultura Viqueque is already planning its next minicamp, centred on agricultural conservation, and have ideas to extend their reach to other communities and other schools in Viqueque in the future. The Minicamp showcased a form of education that is engaging, relevant and builds communities. 50 young people learned about the environment in a way that no textbook can teach and have found inspiration to connect with their land and community for a better future.

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## Deakin Connection *by Heather Wallace*



Last month a number of the committee members attended a meeting chaired by Prof. John Toumbourou at Deakin University. John is exploring the idea of reigniting the Deakin - Timor-Leste partnership that was instrumental in supporting Simao (Simmy) Do Rosario and Afonso Soares attend Deakin a few of years ago. There was much enthusiasm at the meeting, including a hope that our work at GVFS could potentially be supported in the future by the Deakin - Timor-Leste partnership. A follow up meeting is scheduled to be held later this month.

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## The 'Days for Girls' Update and Donations in Kind *by Patrice Hall*

The 'Days for Girls' project continues with the goal to provide the 500 kits requested for the students in the Viqueque district. The Wairn Ponds DFG group hopes to be able to provide all the kits.

Rotary with the 'DONATIONS IN KIND' project will be sending the next container to Dili in early February 2024. They have requested all donations for TL be at the warehouse before they close for the Christmas break on 12 December 2023. This will allow them to book a departure date in early February 2024 which it is hoped will arrive before Easter 2024. Transport to Timor-Leste to be funded by Soroptomists.

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