MC's Vanuatu 'schoolies week'

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In an ABC radio interview, the announcer asked, "…surely taking away 34 eighteen-year-olds for a school trip to a foreign country is the definition of madness—are you mad?". The question still amuses me. The experiences and lessons learnt on the Vanuatu Storm Co. trips are the opposite of madness. It always inspires me that year after year the Year 12 students at Macquarie College step forward and raise significant funds with the express focus of helping others.

The spark of an idea for the Vanuatu Storm Co. came from discussions with former Macquarie College teachers Peter and Glenda Roberts, who, after retirement, had been travelling to Vanuatu to train teachers in Port Vila. The schools they visited—the workplaces of the trainee teachers—needed obvious and overdue help. The photos of one school, Olwi SDA Primary outside Port Vila, motivated groundwork in my mind.

With inspired zeal for an adventurous service trip overseas, and with the overwhelming belief that this was a noble action for Year 12s, I 'pitched' the idea to the graduating class. Not a single student was interested, or even showed an inkling of curiosity. A few months later when, quite embarrassed, I told Peter Roberts of this, he simply replied, "Maybe another time, Olwi School is not going anywhere".

Disheartened and quite saddened, the spark of an idea lost quite a bit of its glow. That was until a few years later, in 2008, Nicki Clark and I shared it with the Year 11 roll class. Nicki was incredibly open to the concept and we timidly pitched the idea in term 4 of 2008, to a lukewarm, but importantly, not a disapproving response. In roll class over the rest of the term we prayed about the idea and, with the emerging idea gaining momentum, Nicki and I thought it wise to tell our spouses what we were hatching, and to our great relief we gained strong support. We cannot thank our families enough for their ongoing patience and encouragement.

In the last weeks of the College year in 2008, the idea was again pitched to Principal Dr Bruce Youlden, all to the backdrop of yet another appalling Schoolies season in QLD. He instantly gave the trip his 'blessing'. The idea of a Vanuatu Storm Co. simply reflected the long established ethic and beliefs of the College. Most of the interested students had prior Storm Co. experience with the College and collectively had far more capability to operate within the Storm Co. tradition than Nicki and I. Parents became incredibly interested and supportive of an alternative to the Schoolies week.

In 2009 Peter Roberts kindly came and spoke to the Year 12s about Olwi SDA School and what they could expect. The students were quite shocked by images of the Olwi classrooms, compared to the luxuries they enjoyed daily. Those images galvanised the trip and were constantly spoken about in preparing for the Storm Co. adventure. In hindsight the first parent meeting for the trip was astonishing. With no real idea where Olwi village exactly was, no contact with the Olwi school Principal, and only a broad idea of where we might stay, every parent at the meeting was incredibly supportive.



[This photograph: Aaron Williams]



Funds were, and are still raised through movie nights, mufti days, cake stalls, milkshake days and appeals to some incredibly generous, often anonymous, donors. In 2011 and 2012 we gratefully took on corporate sponsorship of the trip and this made a significant difference to each year's total. Students pay for their airfares and accommodation, with each fundraised dollar going to Olwi school.

Throughout the planning process we could not find accommodation close to Olwi school. After discussing this with Peter Roberts, he simply said, "Why not just camp on the school oval?" We did, and this immersion into the life of the village has, for most students on the trip, been unforgettable. Living in the heart of the village, experiencing its daily ebb and flow, attending Sabbath programs and eating food cooked by Olwi villagers each night, students take away not just the pride of work well done, but the feel, smell and sensitivity of village life.

The days of the first trip were a source of considerable wonder. After arriving safely in Vanuatu just on dark, we carefully packed up all the students and their luggage to leave for Olwi village. Driving through the suddenly darkening night we finally arrived to a great fanfare and a vast welcoming ceremony. Suddenly, we realised we had left Nicki at the airport. She arrived later in another vehicle arranged for us. After great speeches were exchanged, and delicious coconut juice gulped, the tents went up and the Vanuatu Storm Co. had begun.

Most of the 2009 students had limited camping experience. As the night settled, awareness of the drop toilets, no electricity, supersized bugs and mostly open air but separate gender showers, took effect. A few girls vowed not to go to the toilet for the entire village stay, quietly concerning Amber, our nurse.

On the first morning, jobs were decided, fixing furniture began, and painting was to start. With no swatch of colours, the Olwi teachers gave us a green plastic plate that almost matched the uniform, and said that would do. Off we marched down the dusty tracks to hardware shops for supplies, quickly learning that 'not too far away' has quite a different interpretation in Vanuatu. This scenario feels quite ridiculous now, as on later trips, hardware has been paid for and delivered to the village before our arrival.

The first group set an incredibly high standard, and the remarkable effort students make in Olwi each year amazes us. Although the Vanuatu trip is not compulsory, the vision was to continue a Storm Co. tradition into Year 12 and finish Macquarie College with a gift to those with far less—a vision now experienced by well over one hundred Vanuatu Storm Co. students, and one that has become an integral part of Macquarie College culture. Some participating students are brothers and sisters of previous participants, seeking their own Olwi stories and Vanuatu adventure. Each Vanuatu Storm Co. group meets the standard set by the previous year.

Each year students and teachers alike laugh when I tell them to take their watch off at Sydney Airport; it only takes a day in Olwi village and working in the school, to realise why. Vanuatu Storm Co. always underpins that life is really made up of moments, not days and weeks. Moments taken to paint faces, blow balloons and act stories in kids clubs, to sing and praise at Sabbath School, to sit and chat to Olwi students and villagers.

This year is the fifth anniversary of Macquarie College's Vanuatu Storm Co., an achievement to be justly proud of. The planning and organisation has not been without its challenges and issues, at its heart Micah 6:8 remains its motivation, "To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God". TEACH

Endnote

STORM Co. stands for Service To Others Really Matters Company (http://stormco.adventistconnect.org/about-us)







[Photography: Brad Cox]





