Kokoda Track

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[Photography: Jill Pearce]

What follows is my account of the journey of a lifetime for myself, two staff members and ten amazing students of Macarthur Adventist College.

The beginning

This story began at the end of 2007, a very challenging year at Macarthur. It started with the loss of a very dear staff member to cancer and our first group of students to enroll in Year 9 as we commenced our push into senior high school. In an effort to rally my staff and the students, the question was, "How do I create unity and purpose for these young people when the death of our secondary coordinator had just dealt such a blow to their confidence?"

I believe that it was a God-given idea to seek out the possibility of taking our 2008 Year 10 students on an experience that would transform their lives. I know some people thought I was crazy to attempt this journey with our young people but I believe God never gives us more than we can handle! I knew nothing of the many challenges we would face in the completion of this expedition. The Kokoda Track is renowned for challenging people—young and old. It has claimed lives in war and peace. It has changed people for the better.

The biggest obstacle we faced in the initial stages was energising and inspiring 15 and 16-year-olds to do something that they thought was impossible to finance and outside both their interests and limitations. Thankfully, I had great people who were able to support me in getting the students excited about the dream. I had others to convince as well but that is another story. When we began this journey, it seemed a dream to us all.

Planning and preparation

During the initial planning stage, we felt that we needed more guidance than what we were able to get from just discussing the details with travel agents. As Kokoda is a national icon, it requires a lot of permits and paperwork. Once again, God provided for us. Ross Whelan, principal of Thomas Hassall, a Christian School in our local area, and member of *Beyond Me*, offered to help. *Beyond Me* aims to change the lives of young people by taking them to Kokoda and they were willing to help us with the planning and finances for our trip.

Some people would like to know why I would want to go on one of the world's most difficult and strenuous tracks in the world. Initially, I planned to stay in Port Moresby to provide professional development opportunities for local teachers while the group did the track, but a nagging thought kept returning, "How can I ask my students to do something that I'm not prepared to do myself? How tough could it be?" I was going to find out!

To prepare ourselves we started a training program and read about the track. Here's an excerpt of one source we read:

> It takes around ten hours of walking, climbing, clambering, slipping and skidding to travel from the township of Kokoda to the Isurava battlefield. Think of it as ten hours on a StairMaster exercise machine, most of the time in a steam room. During the tropical downpours which drench the land every afternoon, walking the terrain is like climbing under a fireman's hose. The climbing is relentless, bringing searing pain to thigh muscles, but descending is far worse. It results in what the Diggers called 'laughing knees'—an uncontrollable shaking brought about by overuse of the quads in unfamiliar fashion, a condition exacerbated by constant slipping in the wet. The rain in the tropics is unique. It is 'fat' rain. When you look at it through a clearing in the forest it seems to fall as constant straight lines rather than as drops. It completely changes the landscape. The ground turns to slush—heavy, cloying foul-smelling mud… When the rain eases, the heat kicks in and the humidity becomes almost unbearable—a smothering pressure-cooker. (source: http://www.kokodatrackfoundation.org/track.html)

In spite of reading many such sources, we still did not believe this was going to be so tough! How naïve we were! We had no concept of what Kokoda was going to be like.

The track

I learned a number of life lessons on the track.

Push past the obstacles

Until you have tried something, you can never really comprehend what that something will be like. No matter how many times a person tells you that something is tough, easy, challenging, or exciting, you can never really know it until you have seen, tasted, heard or smelled it.

My Journal
Day 2
(blank)

Day 3
(blank)

Day 4
Yes, there is a reason that I haven't been writing, I have been too exhausted to! The past two days have been nothing short of exhausting, grueling, humbling, and emotional! The body is weak but the blessings and support that I have received from the porters, the kids and the staff have been enormous.

On day two, we crossed a cruel mountain range up to Isurava, famous as the location where the Aussies showed their courage and tenacity while fighting off the invading Japanese army. That is another story that emotions and time won't allow me to share today. The gradient was straight up, up, and up for kilometres. By my side, I had our ex-army man come guide, Colin, along with the head porter and my own personal porter, Nick. I hadn't eaten much for two days, not enough to give me the energy I needed to do this. I began vomiting and dry reaching, unable to stop for some minutes. Colin was such a gentleman, he encouraged me all the way and even gave me his Gatorade to keep me going! I later found out that they didn't think the 'boss lady' was going to make it past that day!

At about 11 am on Day 2, I told Colin that I didn't think I would make it, that I didn't think I could go on. I had slipped and fallen three times that morning, I had bruises the size of tennis balls and lumps that made it hard for me to be comfortable moving, lying or sitting!

When we stopped at the end of Day 3, I even slipped on the steps coming down from the guesthouse. Luckily, I just ended up on my back on the grass, looking up at the sky and thinking what an idiot I was.

Day 4
…I'm still here! God what do You want from me?

God loves idiots

Some people would think that I was an idiot to even try doing the track at my age (53) and in my physical condition (I had a tumour removed from my knee in April).

God loves me just as I am, when I make mistakes, when I fall, when I do things in the dark or in the light, He loves me enough to come along, pick me up, dust me off and get me going again. God loves me all the way. As I walked, climbed and stumbled along the Kokoda Track, those thoughts came back to me, providing the comfort I needed. Each night, I talked with God about my day, thanked Him for getting me through it, asked Him to prepare me for the next day, and thanked Him for the courage of my colleagues and students.

While I lay on my mat each night, unable to move because my body was in so much pain, I would hear the voices of the students rising up in song as they worshipped God with the villagers. They didn't know it but I had tears of joy and pride rolling down my cheeks as I lay there. I knew they too had been challenged by each day of the walk but they persisted and overcame.

> ***"While I lay unable to move because my body was in so much pain, I would hear the voices of the students as they worshipped"***

God provides

On Day 2, after falling and vomiting my way to the top of a mountain ridge and passing through a dangerous water crossing, I came, completely exhausted, close to the rest stop. When I saw staff member, John Kama, waiting for me, I was so overcome that I burst into tears. Andre, our school chaplain, came down and they both prayed for me. At that moment, with both John and Andre holding onto me, I felt so blessed. Andre then rallied the students to support me too. As I approached the campsite, with John supporting me, the students greeted us with a song of encouragement and faith. They then nurtured me with food and words of affirmation until it was time to move on again.

Humbly accept help from others

From that day on, the students devised a system to protect and encourage Mrs Pearce! It didn't take me long to realise that two of the students were 'assigned' to stay with me and encourage me along each section of the track. It was amazing to see these wonderful young people sacrifice to be with me as we moved slowly through the mud and over the tree roots, ever upward and then inevitably downward! Some sang as we trudged along and some quietly chatted but I was always mindful that they had chosen to be there. There was no one forcing them, no one making them feel bad, they just did it! I was very proud of them all; they were showing sacrificial service! Amazing!

Trust

Have you ever held the hand of a stranger? Ever felt that if you didn't grasp a hold of something, you would die?

On the Kokoda Track, there are sections where you have to turn your body side on and inch your way along, holding firmly to tree roots and the hand of your porter, or you could fall hundreds of metres to the valley below. We all had to trust our porters. My porter, Nick, had done many treks and was more experienced than I, I had to trust him. Those who

have done the track say, "If your porter holds out his hand for you, take it!"

When you are offered a hand, how ready are you to take it? Does pride sometimes get in your way? I have to admit that pride has been in the way for me in the past but Kokoda has changed all of that.

I spent four days walking through the jungle of Kokoda, holding the hand of a complete stranger and feeling totally at ease about it. My pride came tumbling down after Day 2, when I realised that if I didn't humble myself and accept Nick's help, I would be at risk. I learned to take his hand when he held it out to me, and to seek his hand when I needed the reassurance and support.

How many times have you sought the hand of another? How many times have you sought the hand of the Master? How many times have you fully admitted to Him that you can't do it on your own? Doing the track gave me, and the students, firsthand experience of the need to trust.

"I can see how God has used tough experiences to bring me to my knees"

Submission

> Three times I begged the Lord to make this suffering go away. But He replied "My kindness is all you need. My power is strongest when you are weak." So if Christ keeps giving me this power, I will gladly brag about how weak I am. Yes, I am glad to be weak, or insulted or mistreated or to have troubles and sufferings if it is for Christ. Because when I am weak, I am strong. (2 Corinthians 12:8–10)

I had read this verse many times but I didn't get its application to my life until I went on the Kokoda Track. I had turned to the Bible for answers to the pain I was enduring on Day 4. My right knee had swollen to twice its size and I wasn't able to walk without great pain.

As Day 5 wore on, my knee became more and more uncomfortable, stiff and swollen. I had taken all the painkillers I could in an effort to reduce the swelling. I took myself off to pray about it and asked God to provide me with a miracle. The word soon spread that the 'boss lady' was having trouble. It wasn't long before a natural healer from another trekking group came over to massage heated reeds over my swollen knee. However, that evening, I was in so much pain I couldn't sleep. I lay in bed tossing and turning, praying and pleading with God to let me have my miracle—the chance to continue the journey. By morning, I still didn't have the miracle I was wanting. My leg was swollen and painful—there was no way I could continue.

I had fought with God and He had won. I had to submit to Him and what He had planned for me and for the rest of the team. It wasn't easy. I did not want to leave them but I knew that God had them in the palm of His hand and I could let go.

Have you had a wrestling match with God? Was it an issue for which you felt you knew the right answer? How often do you submitted to God and His will for your life?

When I look back on my life, I can see how God has used tough experiences to bring me to my knees. He is moulding and sculpting me into who He wants me to be. Those experiences aren't gentle or pleasant but, in the end, they will produce something beautiful. Sometimes it is hard to see how God is working or to recognise the miracle He sent but I am willing to accept that He is in control.

The end of my Kokoda

As I watched the students leave the next morning, I prayed God would provide them with memories that would transform their lives.

The journey continues

We are often reminded of the character traits of Kokoda: "sacrifice, courage, endurance, and mateship". I would love to report that the students were transformed and that they are now doing great things for their school and community, in reality, we are still on the journey of discovery and revelation. They are still discovering what God has planned for their future but they know that with God all things are possible. They conquered one of the most grueling climbs in the world! They did it as a team and they did it despite great difficulties. I am excited about what these students will do with their lives.

God has more 'life lessons' to teach each of us as He moulds us into the person He created each one to be. As the changes take place, we are provided with living examples of the character of God.

Kokoda has taught me that, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." TEACH

Reaching out in the Heat



Keen to reach out to those in your community, but don't know where to start? Want to help young adults make the right decisions when the heat is on, but aren't sure how to approach them?

As an organisation that focuses on strengthening families and instilling hope into the broader community, Focus on the Family does not hesitate to reach out to those who are questioning everything in the midst of a crisis, and the Victorian Bushfires was no exception. 'It's much more than grief and loss,' says Counselling & Program Development Manager, Deb Sorenson, who assisted in providing resources to those helping the fire victims. 'It's about helping people deal with trauma.'

Australia FOCUS ON THE FAMILY

But the practical service of Focus on the Family is not limited to crises, as it pursues many issues including those youth related. It is now accredited by the Department of Education and Training to offer the No Apologies Impact seminar to young adults in Years 7-10 as part of state's curriculum, a seminar designed to help teens make healthy decisions about life, love and sex.

Join us in making a difference when it matters most: call us now on 1300 300 361 or visit www.families.org.au.