

Three days in the life of the Children's Care Centre

Board member Sue recently visited the Children's Care Centre in Aceh, and came home with many special memories!

Sunday is usually a quiet day at the Muhammadiyah /Yots Overseas Relief Fund centre in Banda Aceh. Many of the children go home to visit family and the Manager Andi attends to his reports. The few children who don't go to see family do their jobs or homework or rest in the heat; but on the afternoon of Sunday 5 May it was near deserted. A work colleague Campbell Bridge and I had arrived on the mid day flight from Medan and after being met at the airport Andi took everyone out for lunch (a particular treat for some of the children without family to return to).

We travelled about an hour from the city to a fish farm in the hills and despite getting lost enjoyed the trip, the company and the meal. Campbell is Senior Counsel from my chambers who revels in his alternative interest of adventure traveller/free lance journalist- photographer. I am a proud board member of YOTS – overseas relief fund and we were both keen to check out the progress of the centre that Fr Riley and Tony Stewart had initiated with Dr Markus (Muhammadiyah Chairman) in the dark early days after the tsunami in 2005. The centre has been fully functional now for some time and currently houses 35 children in modest temporary wooden shelters, with camp bathrooms and semi enclosed dining and multipurpose buildings. Children attend schools in the area and a number of former students that have graduated from senior high school are now attending university. There is also a special needs programme which has had significant success developing the social and educational skills of these kids for whom the future was particularly bleak even before the horror of the wave wiping out their families. It is anticipated that the 15 new places will be rapidly filled at the start of the next term in a couple of weeks, with other tsunami orphans. We did our best to fit in with the general routine of the centre and Sunday night, modestly dressed complete with jilbab as dressed by the girls, accompanied Ladin (a centre driver) and Mimi (the maintenance man) on the drive to collect some the children from their extended families. The drive was fascinating- travelling right through the areas hit by the wave.

The sun set over the freshly planted mangroves, and low lying land now dotted with clumps of small new houses, each small suburb featuring some hint of the country that has donated the aid. Gradually the 4wd filled with children and much chattering noise; -there are some things that are simply universal across cultures. We were particularly grateful to Andi and Lia (girls group leader) for taking us in to the city to see some of the sites, including the Mosque, after the children had gone to school, and returned the treat by shouting a fabulous ‘take away’ sate dinner and soup for the centre-all these perfect individual parcels of Sate with sauce wrapped in banana leaf and brown paper and soup individually served in plastic bags (just like you’d take home a goldfish). Apparently we’d fluked a favourite food of the kids and the cooks were grateful for a nights off. The centre is staffed by 3 cooks all of whom live on the premises and are widows of the tsunami. It was also very impressive to learn that the organic veggie garden has also attracted the attention of the children and they are competing to grow the biggest and the best. The children also administer the meagre but treasured Library and there is a waiting list for the centre’s computer classes that teach word and excel to the local children. The 5 computers service classes several times a week and have been a new catalyst for good relationship building with the community. I met most of the group leaders who, without exception, impressed as warm, considerate, and accomplished, not only at their jobs but also with their own further study. Leah was collecting her Robes as we were there for her graduation ceremony having just completed her Bachelor degree in Agriculture- can’t wait to see how the garden progresses. Detailed records are kept on the progress on the children and some of the special needs kids were very keen for me to look at their files – I couldn’t understand a word of the written Indonesian and felt particularly hopeless but did much ‘knowing nodding’ - they knew they were improving and took pride in their progress, really cool. Mostly, the children shyly chatted to me in their modest English and I sorted communication with lots of gestures, nouns and laughter. By contrast Campbell successfully cracked jokes in Indonesian – quite often to the surprise of the locals and most everyone loved having their photos taken.

On our last day, after some persuasion, Andi, Lia, Mimi joined us for a trip across to Pulau Wei, an island just off the coast of Banda Aceh -the ferry trip across reminded me of the Manly Ferry, and the mountainous island was quite enchanting. The clean warm water for snorkelling and swimming was the perfect antidote for the heat and I had the feeling that Andi, Lia and Mimi were enjoying the day as much as we did and were grateful for some rare time off. The trip

back was frantic and fun and we did unfortunately make all our connections for flights! The plans for the new permanent buildings at the Centre are in their final stages of preparation and a carefully monitored tender process for the building has commenced. It seems nothing moves very fast in this part of Indonesia, except for the motor cycles, but having met Andi and witnessed his quiet, gentle tenacity I am confident that he will keep things moving as quickly as officialdom will permit. I can't wait to go back!!