

**FOLP – Fund-raising Evening – Toorak College – 12
May 2006**

Mayor of Mornington Shire Council, Brian Stahl, Mrs Evelyn Krape, David Price, Chairperson of the FOLP East Timor Community Committee, Fran Rule, Secretary, Helen Hendry and to all the many committed and caring individuals from this community who give time, energy and care to sustaining your relationship and partnerships with the people of Lospalos.

It was six years ago, May 2000 to be precise, that I visited the Mornington Peninsula with my husband as a guest of the Shire Council. At that time, Xanana was not yet President of Timor-Leste and Mum hadn't yet taken up residence in Rosebud. They were different times, but the chill of the air in May hasn't altered, nor the warmth of the reception of the people of the Mornington Peninsula.

Thank you for inviting me to be here. It is my intention this evening to use this unique opportunity to say thank you for the support that the Friends of Lospalos Committee has

given to enhancing the educational prospects of the young people of Lospalos to date through your education programs. I will do so by sharing with you some stories and images of scholarship recipients in the hope that you will be moved to continue and expand this assistance.

But I also want to talk to you a little about the education system more broadly, the challenges faced by our Ministry of Education and Culture in rolling out a national system of education across a country where 60% of the population are aged 18 years and under. I would also like to talk briefly about some of the contributions being made by the Alola Foundation to improving access to and quality of education in the world's youngest nation.

SLIDE 2.

Let's start with a bit of background to set the scene. In post-referendum 1999, the education system in Timor-Leste was destroyed, with approximately 90% of schools – including buildings, furniture and teaching materials – burned or looted, and an estimated 20% of primary teachers, 80% of secondary teachers and almost all educational

administrators and managers – being Indonesian nationals – leaving the country. It's hard to imagine really.

Nevertheless, as early as October 1999, with the country still literally smoldering and with Indonesian troops having withdrawn only weeks earlier, the children of Timor-Leste brushed off their uniforms and returned to school In many cases to find their schools were no longer standing, their teachers gone. But such was the thirst for education and for the desire to resume the rhythm of normal life that kids and their parents erected make-shift shelters as their classrooms, high school graduates stood in as teachers, paper and pencils were salvaged from the ruins of burn-out houses and shops, and in these conditions a new academic year and indeed era commenced.

Teacher numbers have grown and stabilised, with more than 4000 primary school teachers comprising the single largest segment of the government workforce. By 2002/03, the average student:teacher ratio had improved to 44:1 It is slightly lower in Catholic schools. The primary school curriculum was approved by the Council of Ministers on 9 June 2005, together with a plan for its implementation.

This then paves the way for the staggered introduction of a new curriculum for each of the junior secondary and senior secondary education sectors.

However, teaching quality is a major problem – 20-25% of students are failing each year. Today less than half of children enrolling in primary school complete six years of education. Low school attendance is often the result of poverty. Poor children also tend to drop out sooner.

SLIDE 3.

Our national constitution – the constitution of the Democratic Republic of East Timor – commits our government to achieving the goal of universal, free education. Nevertheless, at the present time budgetary constraints mean that fees have been levied at all levels as a means of exacting contributions to the costs of the most basic material supplies, teaching aids etc. In 2002 the Ministry of Education Culture Youth and Sports set the limit that schools could charge students at US\$0.50 a month for primary schools, US\$1.00 for junior secondary and US\$1.50 for senior secondary. While there is no indication

that charges are levied compulsorily, evidence suggests that these payments act as a disincentive and deter enrolments among poorer families. ... [M]any families simply cannot afford to send their children to school... [and] families will often opt to send their boy children to school before their girl children in the hope that this will bring greater economic returns to the household.” (UNICEF (2004), p 68)

A scholarship program has been administered by my organization, the Alola Foundation, since 2003. It aims to enhance access to education for the young people of Timor-Leste, with priority given to young women and the children of former resistance fighters, including those orphaned by the 24 year old struggle for independence or those living in single parent families. We presently administer some 1500 scholarships across each of East Timor’s 13 districts. Melbourne University has funded approximately 500 scholarships for secondary school age girls for the past three years, but we receive funding for our scholarship program from about 15 other individual and institutional

donors, including of course the FOLP East Timor Committee.

SLIDE 4.

To date, the money raised by the Committee has gone towards supporting two students at Baucau Catholic Teachers' College (presently in the second semester of their first year of studies), and 14 junior high school students in Lospalos. (you can see some of them in the slide). I sincerely hope that, as a result of your presence here this evening, this support will be continued and perhaps even expanded.

Let me give you a profile of a typical East Timorese student, just to give you an idea of some of the difficulties and challenges faced by young people in obtaining an education. The average student in rural areas faces a walk to and from school in excess of an hour. He or she will probably make this journey without having had breakfast and possibly without shoes. She may be physically exhausted by the time she reaches school since she may have been involved in household chores such as collecting

water or firewood and feeding livestock before even setting off for school. He may reach school and discover that his teacher is absent due to illness or participation in a teacher training workshop in the district capital. For lack of writing materials, she may find herself unable to take notes or to benefit fully from the lessons provided. If it is raining, classes may be cancelled due to impassable roads or leaks in the roof and ceiling of the school building which flood classrooms. – (the principal of a Lospalos primary school recently complained to me that the grade 6 classroom is regularly flooded when rainfall is heavy given the state of disrepair of the roof and ceiling). He may be unable to complete homework or review lessons at home due to an absence of electricity or the burden of extra household chores. Given high rates of illiteracy for both women and men, it is unlikely that he or she will receive encouragement or assistance for their studies from their parents. Poor nutrition and even hunger are additional factors which impact significantly on young people's capacity to learn.

SLIDE 5.

An unknown number of young women enrolled in secondary schools absent themselves from school on a temporary and sometimes permanent basis with the onset of menstruation. The reason is lack of access to sanitary items to stem blood flow during their periods, requiring them to stay at home for up to a week at a time each month. This is a completely unresearched and little known problem but one which impacts significantly on girls' education. Purchase of sanitary pads needs to be a cost factored into scholarship funds targeting young women.

So, where is the good news story in all of this, I hear you ask. Well, the good news is that a little goes a long way in improving children's access to education. The average daily income in East Timor is 0.50 cents. We have the highest fertility rate in the world, with an average of 8 children per family. This explains why the vast majority of families find it difficult to educate all of their children. \$AUD 60 per annum can provide a secondary school age child with all of the basic items they require to attend school for one academic year. That's probably what we in Australia spend

on *cappuccinos* or *lattes* over just two or three months. A little has the potential to go a very long way ... and it does.

I feel that it is important to share with you some of the difficulties associated with administering a scholarships program such as the one we at the Alola Foundation run. Our postal and banking system and services are limited to Dili, thus all correspondence with scholarship recipients, all payments and collection of progress reports involve visits to individual schools by our Scholarships Coordinator or Program Officer. It is a time consuming process given the state of roads in some of the more remote parts of the country, particularly during the wet months from November to April and the fact that only a tiny percentage of our population are contactable via phone. Sometimes our Scholarships Coordinator will spend half a day to travel to an area to disburse scholarships only to find that the principal of the school concerned is in Dili to attend a training program or to follow up on a request to the Ministry of Education for assistance with materials or basic infrastructure. This can translate into significant delays in

reporting back to donors on progress with scholarship disbursements.

The Alola Foundation's Scholarships Program has employed only two program staff to implement our scholarships program as we, like our donors, wish to limit administration costs and put as high a percentage of donor funds into actual scholarships as possible. What this does mean, however, is that it becomes increasingly difficult for us to supply individual donors with detailed reports of beneficiaries, i.e. lists of names and reports on the progress of individual students. Our newly recruited Scholarships Coordinator, the exuberant Nivio Magalhaes, hopes to be able to send out a quarterly bulletin to all donors to our scholarships program which will give an overview and some student profiles.

SLIDE 6.

A few weeks ago, Mum and my brother and I, plus a few friends, visited Lautem district, the district in which Lospalos is located, to celebrate my 40th birthday. We

visited two schools which are part of the Alola Foundation's Friendship Schools program, Primary Schools Number 1 and Number 3.

At Primary School Number 3, linked through the Alola Foundation's Friendship Schools Project with Vale Street, Mornington and St McCartens Primary Schools, we were greeted with a hall full of smiling students decked out in pristine white uniforms and some in colourful traditional dress. They sang the national anthem of Timor-Leste which reduced most of us to tears. Towards the end of the small welcoming ceremony, they presented me with a letter which the school principal had tapped out on a rickety old manual typewriter. In the letter they kindly requested that I give consideration to their request for scholarship support for the school's 19 orphans. I told them about tonight's event and asked them to stay tuned for further news.

Years of violent conflict in Timor-Leste have left more than one in ten children with only one or no living parent, according to UNDP's 2006 Human Development Report. To be able to support these 19 children through their

primary school education for two to three years would cost only \$AUD 2,000 -3,000. So tonight I am doing what is known as passing the buck in a big way, and setting you this challenge! There will be at least 19 very grateful children and families if you are able to oblige.

SLIDE 7.

Finally, I want to talk to you just briefly about the work of the Alola Foundation in general. In addition to our Scholarships Program, we have projects aimed at bringing about a reduction in our alarmingly high infant and maternal mortality rate and activities designed to boost the financial independence of women by promoting their handicrafts and assisting them to find markets for their products. Our National Breastfeeding Association of Timor-Leste trains health workers and women volunteers at the village level in the nutritional and other benefits of exclusive breastfeeding for 6 months after birth.

SLIDE 8.

Believe it or not, but the practice of exclusive breastfeeding in a country like East Timor has the potential to save lives and does.

A handful of Peninsula schools have a connection with a school in Lospalos which has been facilitated by the Alola Foundation's Friendships Schools project. The project fosters cross-cultural understanding amongst young people in the two countries, raises funds to buy urgently needed school supplies and sporting equipment in East Timor and is presently conducting workshops for teachers involved in the scheme. Recently our Friendship Schools project staff gave a workshop at a number of schools on how to write a letter – the structure, content, basic greetings and endings etc. To their surprise, many of the classroom teachers themselves had very little idea about how to write a letter. Now why should that surprise us? East Timor was cut off from the outside world for 24 years and the Indonesian authorities actively discouraged the people from communicating through any means whatsoever with the outside world.

I could talk for hours about what we do and why we do it. What I do want to stress in concluding is that, at the heart of each and every one of our activities is education, not always formal education or training, but the slow but important process of shifting mentalities and transforming lives with the power of awareness and knowledge. When I am asked what is the single most important ingredient in the nation building recipe, I answer always EDUCATION. It is the key which will unlock the door to a bright future for Timor-Leste and its citizens.

SLIDE 9.

I thank you for being here tonight and for your contributions to attainment of that dream.

Kirsty Sword Gusmao

12 May, 2006