

## Dispatches from PNG: the adventures of an Intrepid Librarian

Late in 2006, I decided I wanted to do something different, something that would help other people and take me out of my comfort zone. My eldest daughter had completed a couple of volunteer postings, and she suggested I try Australian Business Volunteers (ABV).

ABV is funded by AUSAID and specialises in short-term projects in the Asia-Pacific region. Most of their volunteers are retirees but there are also some like me who use their long service leave or annual leave to complete projects for them. ABV pays all expenses, so I was not going to be out of pocket by doing it. They also try to find projects where a husband and wife can go together.

By April I was advised of an eight-week project in Papua New Guinea (PNG) at the Church of the Nazarene Teacher Training College Library. I was hesitant at first as I had never considered going to PNG and I wasn't really keen on missionaries. But, after deciding I was being picky, and as the college provided teacher training, I applied. My application was accepted and the planning began ... Who would look after my house and my cats ... how would I pay my utility bills ... not to mention the slight anxiety I was feeling as to what the conditions would be like.

I read about PNG and the Western Highlands and discovered I would not be able to go out at night, and during the day I should not go out alone. PNG is a third world country — half the population is illiterate and lives in grass huts without running water or electricity. Crime is prevalent, violence against women is a big problem and rape is common. A week before I left, the official travel advice for the area was upgraded to 'reconsider travel to this region' because of upcoming elections, but after discussions with ABV it was decided I would be fine. Now, just bear in mind that my definition of intrepid is relative: I think three star is roughing it and I certainly don't go camping!

The college is located in the Western Highlands about a half hour's drive from Mt Hagen, PNG's third largest city and in the middle of coffee plantations. I had my own house on the college grounds and the staff set up a TV and VCR for me, so I was at least able to keep up with current affairs. I cooked for myself and had weekly trips into town to the supermarket and market.

The market was fantastic, costing about \$4 a week for all my fruit and vegetables.

The education system in PNG is dependant upon missionaries and churches, which are recognised by the Officer of Higher Education (OHE). I attended a meeting of the College Board and the OHE regarding accreditation for the teacher training course I had just commenced. The work that Samuel, the college librarian, and I were doing was important to the business planning, policy development and local community engagement that would lead to attaining accreditation, so it was a fortuitous time for me to be there.

The library was good but needed a lot of work and one of my tasks was to train Samuel in cataloguing and subject headings. A lot of the collection was extremely old and there had been a tendency to keep everything that was donated whether it was worthwhile or not (for example, a 1959 Colliers encyclopedia, computer books on WordStar, WordPerfect and Lotus 123 etc.)

Samuel and I developed a collection management policy, business plan, volunteer training plans, a library brochure, new signs, and undertook a lot of weeding.

The elections were a hoot — the number of people registered to vote was higher than the number eligible, ballot boxes were stolen and later recovered, candidates and supporters intimidated voters and interrupted counting. The army was brought into town along with extra police to guard polling booths, set up road blocks and generally keep the peace. Weapons such as AK47s were confiscated on a regular basis. While the nationals are very friendly people, the collectivist tribal culture is still very evident. A tribal leader was killed while I was there.

Despite all this, I enjoyed my small project in PNG and will definitely consider doing this again; maybe somewhere else, next year.

What have I learnt?

- I have a very privileged life in Australia and am very lucky to have been born into it.

- There are still many, many people in this world who live in poverty and have to fight for even the basics of human existence.
- Education is one of the most important things we can provide and libraries are very important in helping with this.
- Too often we concentrate on our differences, and it seems to me that these differences are a very small component of what makes us human beings — we are more alike than we are different.
- If you are donating books for a worthy cause, please take the time to consider whether they are in good condition and the information is still useful.

For more information on the projects that are available and how to register, have a look at <<http://www.abv.org.au>>. You can read more about my adventure on my blog at <<http://www.karyns-blog.blogspot.com>>.

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