

My name is Emma Davey, and I have recently returned from a six month adventure in Vanuatu. From July until December, 2010, the place I called home was a veritable tropical island paradise. My little village was nestled into the wild jungle of an island called Pentecost; with the ocean just a stone's throw away from my front door. This probably seems like a somewhat unusual place to find an Australian 19 year old fresh out of high school, and it's thanks to the combined effort and support of two organisations that I've been able to claim this experience as my own. Latitude is an organisation that provides volunteer placements for young people around the world, and Lions International supported me financially, making this incredible period of my life possible.



Sunset from our front porch

My stated purpose for leaving everything I knew behind and heading to a random third world country was teaching English, but what I saw and did went far beyond that. Upon arrival, I found myself teaching English to a class of 37 students under the age of 12. To make this more challenging (as if I needed that!), English is their fourth language and they'd only been learning it for six months. After my time in Vanuatu, I must confess that I have come to appreciate just how challenging teaching must be as a full-time career.



Eleanor and I teaching

However, in spite of the incredible amount of noise my kids were capable of generating, and no matter how far up the wall they sometimes drove me, I came to love the hours I spent teaching them. By the end of 6 months I felt I could say with certainty that I had made a difference to them, and it feels good to know that I achieved what I set out to do.

I was extraordinarily fortunate, however, that my experience was not limited to the school alone. The village in which I lived, Latano, is a traditional Kastom village. This means that, in spite of the presence of the Catholic Church, and certain modern articles such as clothes, saucepans and mobile phones, the people still live and believe much the same as they have for centuries. Their Kastom is a very complex weaving together of ceremonies, chiefs, tradition and black magic. Scarcely a week after my arrival I was honoured



Eleanor Smith and I taking Kastom

to take a ceremony into Kastom. This made me, as I was constantly told, a woman of Pentecost. I was presented with various traditional artefacts including a pigs tusk, a feather headpiece and woven mats (which I was very concerned would be confiscated by Australian Customs), and given a name in the local language. I was to be known as Miss Emma by my students, and Misalvanua by everyone else. My name roughly translates to 'belonging to this place', and I am very proud to claim it as my own. The ceremony involved traditional dress and the sacrifice of two pigs (one for me and one for my co-volunteer, Eleanor).



**Me with my family at the gardens
– note the view!!!!**

Another part of the society (and becoming a true member of the community) was taking part in the activities of everyday life. This involved some absolutely epic hikes to their gardens (inconveniently located at the top of the very high, very steep hills behind the village). They grow all of their own food and just about every adult in the community will go to the gardens at least once a day. The views from the gardens were spectacular, and definitely worth the gruelling climb to get there. My newly acquired skills include weeding with a machete and cracking open coconuts for a refreshing drink whilst gardening. Another of the local customs that Eleanor and I were determined to master was basket weaving. It turned out to be a very time consuming, fiddly project, but we persevered, and can now both claim to be able to weave baskets in the style of North Pentecost (which I imagine is something that not many people in the western world can say!).



One of my baskets in progress



Me with my Class 3/4 students

The school at which I taught had only the most basic resources, and covered Years 1 to 7. In future years it hopes to extend until it eventually reaches Year 10. The main problem with this plan is the severe lack of funding facing the school. Aware of this, I was overwhelmed when the City of Launceston Lions Club (my sponsor club for the Lions Youth of the Year Quest, 2009), offered to donate some money to the school to help it provide higher education. The \$500 that they provided allowed me to help furnish a Year 8 classroom and a small boarding

house that will open this year in 2011. Their contribution has made a huge difference to the village community and will go a long way to making education available to all the children in the area.

There are four things that are truly important to the people I knew in Vanuatu. These are community, Kastom, religion and family. It is customary in Vanuatu to be adopted by a family upon arrival into a community, and I was no exception. I have gained a mother, father, five sisters and two brothers as well as an absolutely enormous extended family. They really made me feel at home, and on days when I was hopelessly homesick, still managed to make me laugh. I expect to keep in contact (by very slow mail) with them for the rest of my life.



Some of the members of my Vanuatu family

My time in Vanuatu was shared by Eleanor Smith, the girl who was placed with me in Latano. We lived together for six months and shared the most amazing, unbelievable experiences imaginable. The laughter, fears, joys,



Eleanor and I on our way to the Post Office by boat



Nukatumbal in a home-made basket

homesickness and trials we shared together have resulted in an incredibly close friendship that I fully expect to last our entire lives. We lived together in a house on the school grounds, and our little family unit was made complete by our adoption of a very small cat, which we named Nukatumbal (a local fruit whose name roughly translates to Dragon Plum). One of the best things about my adventure was the friendship that developed between us, and upon leaving the country, saying goodbye to my family and Nukatumbal was hard, but saying goodbye to Eleanor (who lives in New Zealand) was sadder and harder by far.

My experience in Vanuatu was totally foreign to anything in my life so far. The staples of my diet were things I had never heard of six months ago, and can't be found in Australia, but I grew to quite enjoy some of them. I hand washed my clothes and showered from a bucket, which has truly allowed me to appreciate the comforts of home. I am thrilled to be back in Australia, but my experience over the last six months was amazing, and the memories and things I have learnt I would not give up for the world. I have had a rare glimpse into a largely hidden culture and the support of everyone around me, not to mention Latitude and Lions, has been invaluable. My heartfelt thanks to everyone involved. It was truly the experience of a lifetime.



Dinner for our (very large) family