

“Be sensitive and recognise your own prejudices” Elizabeth Donnan

Sr Elizabeth Donnan, an Australian born Loreto Sister, currently works in Zambia, focusing on assisting schools and communities to be sustainable and self sufficient. In a country where resources are scarce and communities must pull together to survive, Sr Elizabeth is constantly challenged and humbled by her experiences.

Her first taste of Africa came in the midst of her teaching career, when in 1988 she undertook a tertainship in Kenya. She spent six months in Kenya, in what she says was a “very challenging but mind broadening” time. Her interest in cross cultural issues enabled her to embed herself in the life and culture of the Kenyans and she felt a connection to the people there and the way of life.

When she returned to Australia she took on the role of Superior at Ballarat and was responsible for sisters in temporary vows. She continued her teaching career and also pursued her interests in cultural issues. In 1997 she compiled a book on cross cultural missioning and exchange within the worldwide IBVM Loreto Sisters institute. She was a key driver behind cross cultural issue awareness and ministries and questioned how well the Institute operated within a cross cultural framework. She found this to be a great personal challenge and believes that this led her to where she finds herself today.

She says that one of her key learnings throughout her experiences has been “to be sensitive and recognise your own prejudices. Because of the culture we grow up in we subconsciously regard ourselves as superior in some way but we are not always aware of this”.

Following the life changing experience in Kenya she volunteered to go to South Africa in 1997. Within a few months found herself living in a township near Witbank (100km from Pretoria) learning Zulu (one of the official languages).

There she taught in a government secondary school for seven and a half years. They had no science lab but after six years she was able to set one up, “cautiously and carefully” she emphasizes. In such a fragile structure and sensitive township still scarred by years of apartheid, she felt she had to proceed in a gradual sense and bring a sense of empowerment to the community at the same time. She didn’t want to be seen as making sweeping changes in such a volatile setting.

She completed her work at the school in 2004 and then spent the next few months traveling between Zambia and South Africa. As part of the Courage to Move mission in South Africa, Sr Elizabeth volunteered along with fellow Loreto Sister, Sr Pat Hanvey to undertake a new post in Zambia. She soon found herself in Lukulu in the western province of Zambia:- a very poor and remote township, but a town where she could see endless opportunities to assist. She speaks highly of Sr Pat, a lateral thinker, with such an open heart and capacity to care. Pat is involved in home based care and organizes volunteer carers to look after very ill people (affected by AIDS and leprosy) in their homes.

Elizabeth began teaching at two high schools in Lukulu – one with two unequipped science labs and the other with two news labs being built – both however with no plans for funding to equip them and actually make them usable. Sr Elizabeth has always firmly believed that whatever you set out to do must be sustainable so she met with principals and said she would help them source equipment. Her solution was to use the local community to make the equipment and furniture as a way of helping them to help themselves. Through word of mouth and informal advertising to carpenters she was able to have 50 stools made per lab and both labs were up and running last year. She also managed to source other equipment such as mirrors and electrical circuits from the local community.

With the help of donations through Mary Ward International Australia (MWIA) and the generous support of Kirribilli Parents and Friends Wishing Well Project, Aloysius Social Circle and other individuals she has purchased non-consumable science equipment for the two labs. This includes

pulleys, slotted weights, trucks, copies of experiment sheets and answer sheets. Bunsen burners, a staple in Australian schools, remain an elusive dream for the two schools as the roads are so poor – well non-existent – that gas cannot be delivered. However with the new equipment teachers will be provided with resources to conduct meaningful science practical classes. The facilities will also be used to train science teachers – particularly in finding practical and creative ways of teaching science using the limited resources available.



MWIA also assisted with purchase of resources such as stationery and other materials that Sr Elizabeth uses to prepare people for Christian Rite of Initiation – Baptism, Eucharist and Confirmation for Catechetics programs in villages of Selembe and Kalambwe. She was astounded and humbled to meet people who had never before held a pencil, never written, nor drawn on paper. In fact they had never seen anything depicted in a picture. The funds are not only used for resources in the classroom but also for fuel for the transport – as Selembe is 9 km from Lukulu and Kalambwe 15 km from Lukulu. One of the biggest issues facing the people of the surrounding villages is the isolation and lack of sealed roads or permanent track. Travel is mainly by ox cart and at night, making it particularly difficult for people travelling to hospital to get tested and to receive medication for HIV/AIDS.



In a recent letter, Elizabeth reports that she is now trying to learn siLozi, the language used in the church, but the language of Kalambwe is Luvale and the language of Selembe is Lunda, originating from Congo. It is quite a challenge!

Now, following a generous donation from a Melbourne family, three people from the Lukulu district will be able to go to teachers' college. There are many excellent untrained teachers and the Loreto Sisters are constantly being approached by individuals requesting financial help to train as teachers. This funding will help the Loreto Sisters to increase the pool of English speaking and trained teachers in the district, an area where teachers from other parts of Zambia are very reluctant to settle due to isolation, remoteness and lack of amenities. This will inturn increase the numbers of primary aged children that can enrol in formal education.

Of her life in Zambia, she reflects that they are all working together to survive. Progress is slow but steady and trust is important. However she feels that the church has a symbolic presence in this isolated and impoverished but peaceful scene. Elizabeth is serving where the need is great and where her gifts can be put to greatest use – guiding principals of Loreto mission work.



Thanks to the generous support of Loreto networks and friends Elizabeth can continue her work and make a difference to the lives of countless vulnerable and disadvantaged individuals. For further information about how you can also help please visit www.loreto.org.au or email MWIA at mwiaustralia@loreto.org.au