

Mary Ward International Australia volunteers share their experiences 2009

This year, Mary Ward International Australia (MWIA) launched its volunteer program. The MWIA Volunteer Program is aimed at Loreto past-pupils, staff, parents and friends of the wider Loreto network wishing to become more involved with Loreto works for justice and development in Australia and overseas.

Six MWIA volunteers, all Loreto Toorak past-pupils or teachers, have recently returned from placements with Loreto projects in Alice Springs, Kenya, Peru and India.

These women are the first group of volunteers to take part in the MWIA preparation and re-entry program which included sessions on spirituality, Mary Ward values, Catholic Social Teaching, cross-cultural encounters, issues around charity and development and practical aspects of volunteering. On return, the volunteers participated in a day of debriefing. This gave them the opportunity to reflect on their experience and share their stories. They have all generously provided written accounts about their experiences and here we share some of their motivations and inspiring moments.

Bridget Scanlon (class of 2003) spent three weeks in April this year working with Sr Helen Parer in Alice Springs. She travelled with Sr Helen to the remote Aboriginal Communities of Santa Teresa and TiTree to assist with the retail course being offered to young people by Charles Darwin University.

Bridget says that volunteering is a great way to bring things back into perspective and something that everyone should try to do. Bridget explained that "The dedication that people like Sr Helen have to the indigenous people in itself was inspiring. What I really learnt though is that there are people with hearts and minds bigger than their bodies and they will help where help is needed. There were a lot of resilient people who, despite being dealt the tough cards in life, made the decision to keep on going and often these people were the most kind, generous and open people I met.' She encourages future volunteers to go with an "open mind" and to be prepared to "listen before asking questions."

Georgette Scanlon, Fenina Acance and Clare Condon (class of 2006) spent time in Darjeeling, India in June/July working with the Mary Ward Social Centre (MWI Darjeeling). Their tasks included evaluating the Centre's development programs, writing funding applications, researching the Loreto activities taking place throughout the region and collating information and pictures for the Centre's website.



Clare and Georgette pictured left.

Fenina (pictured below) says that she chose to volunteer with MWIA as it offers “a unique experience with its established and extensive programmes across the world”. Fenina found Lolay, a remote rural community in steep and rocky hill top areas, to be very inspiring. The community has been extremely isolated from vital resources including electricity and health care facilities. There is a newly built road that allows easier access to the area but most houses are only accessible through small paths in wild vegetation, crops and rivers. During their visit to Lolay the girls met “some amazing women who travelled hours up and down the hills assisting as paramedics or teachers at the local Loreto primary school”.



Georgette decided to volunteer because she wanted to understand the challenging circumstances that many are forced to live in. She says, “I chose to volunteer with MWIA because of its emphasis on women and children, on development instead of charity and on program design informed by the local people who are intended to benefit. I have always greatly admired Mary Ward’s ability to think beyond the constraints of the society and church structure she lived in and conceive a more just society. I think this calls us to constantly be challenging the inherent prejudices in our community that we have come to accept or ignore”.

The relationship she formed with the Loreto Sisters of the Darjeeling region was one of her most rewarding experiences. “While the work they did in helping the marginalized was truly inspiring, it was the way in which they went about this work that left the greatest impact on me.”

Michelle McCarty (Year 12 Coordinator at Loreto Toorak) spent one month of her long service leave in Nairobi, Kenya (see photo below) . Michelle wanted to assist in an environment where “education is much tougher than it is here”. She chose MWIA because she wanted the chance to learn more about the work of the Loreto Sisters and to bring back some of this knowledge to Australia. Michelle took classes, assisted teachers in Loreto schools and also visited Loreto community projects in surrounding areas. She was impressed by the work the Sisters do “in tough circumstances, with few material resources and for little instant reward. They are big hearted, generous, smart and determined women.” She met several women in slum areas on the outskirts of Nairobi and found “their stories of survival and joy in the face of adversity, humbling”. The girls she met at the Loreto schools were “lively, curious, determined and incredibly hard working young women who have great dreams for their own futures and for the future of their country.” Some key insights that Michelle wanted to share on her return were: “that we have just as much in common with our fellow Loreto communities in other lands as differences; that sharing stories, knowledge and spreading awareness are positive steps towards change; that education is the key to breaking the cycle of poverty and oppression and that grass roots projects are powerful agents of change, often underestimated by society.”



Louise Peyton (Director of Loreto Toorak Junior School), volunteered in Peru, also as part of her long service leave. During her placement Louise helped establish a library at the Fe y Algeria School in Jicamarca, where the Loreto Sisters are working. "Witnessing the way Sr Patricia McLaughlin runs the school was inspiring. The school is like a haven for so many children and they LOVE coming to school. Living with Patricia, and Srs Winnie and Mercedes in Jicamarca was also a highlight. They face so many challenges every day, yet remain upbeat, positive and enthusiastic about their work. Srs Anne and Carmen, in Lima, are also inspirational women. Anne is the Provincial in Peru and is a wealth of knowledge. Carmen works with the people in Lampa, a very poor part of Lima. She runs programs for children, families, and married couples." Louise says that "the value of felicity particularly attracted me to Loreto some nine years ago, and I endeavour to model that in all aspects of my life."

How can you help?

All the returned volunteers provided similar thoughts of how we can all contribute. Simply talking with friends, families and colleagues is a great way to start a circle of knowledge and understanding of the issues and injustices facing others. Georgette highlighted that "having an interest in the welfare of others and a willingness to engage with social justice causes is probably the first step to helping. Volunteering or financially supporting the work of the Loreto Sisters... is a good next step as they work within communities shaping their programs through close relationships with those marginalized ensuring effective help and empowerment".

Louise aptly sums up, "Be interested in what others are doing in Loreto communities worldwide (and other volunteer agencies too). Make contact. Ask questions. Read and investigate. Make others aware. Don't be content with ignoring the situation, thinking someone else will act."



Volunteering with MWIA provides an opportunity to gain a rich insight into the work of Loreto Sisters in Australia and abroad. Both long and short term placements are fully self-funded and involve working with a specific project in a Loreto program in Australia or overseas. If you would like further information or a copy of the *Volunteering with MWIA* brochure, please call Libby Rogerson ibvm or Elissa Barry on (03) 9813 4023, email us at mwiaustralia@loreto.org.au or visit our website www.loreto.org.au.