

Vanuatu calling!

Working as a librarian on a small tropical island in the South Pacific sounds like paradise. Or does it? From July to December 2007 I worked as a Librarian at Epi High School in Lamén Bay on the Island of Epi in the Shefa Province of Vanuatu.

By early 2007 I had spent two and a half years working for a library software company and it was time to do something else. In 2006 I visited the only public library in Suva, Fiji and realised how much my skills could assist a library in a developing country. I had always wanted to make a difference, to give something back to the world. When I saw the volunteer placement for a high school librarian in Vanuatu with the Australian Youth Ambassadors for Development Program (AYAD), I applied without a second thought.

AYAD is an Australian Government AusAID supported initiative that aims to strengthen mutual understanding between Australia and the countries of the Asia-Pacific region and make a positive contribution to development. The program achieves these aims by placing at least 400 skilled 18 to 30 year old Australians on short-term assignments in developing countries in the Asia Pacific region every year. AYAD volunteers work with local counterparts in host organisations to achieve sustainable development outcomes through capacity building, skills transfer and institutional strengthening.

Epi High School is a government boarding secondary school on the island of Epi. The college enrolls students from years 8 to 12. In 2004 the school was severely damaged by Cyclone Ivy. Some new buildings, including a library, were constructed with assistance from the Australian Government.

When I applied for the position of School Librarian, I took into consideration the fact that there weren't roads around the entire island, that the planes (and hence the postal mail) only came in twice a week, and that there was limited generator electricity available at the school. This turned out to be for only 3 hours a day, from 6 – 9pm. There is no mobile service, and the telephone line at the school office didn't always work.

I worked at the school for five months; assisting the school librarian and two other colleagues to establish a library, improve the collection of resources, develop budget guidelines and a policy and procedures manual, and train the students and staff to use and maintain a library effectively.

When I take a look back at my assignment outcomes, I wonder how on earth I managed to achieve a single one of these goals, let alone the majority of them. My experience at

Epi High School taught me that it is important to be flexible when undertaking any project, especially a difficult one such as this.

One of the biggest challenges I had was trying to work out where to source new books from. There are no book publishers in Vanuatu. I had to begin by obtaining a list of educational publishers in Australia and New Zealand, and I had to do this without having access to the internet.

On the plus side, there was a beautiful 1.5 km long beach that was visible from my house, all the local produce was organic and very cheap, and it was warm every day. This experience changed my life. Although the challenges, both work related and personal were vast, I would greatly encourage anyone to take a giant step outside of their comfort zone and do something to make a difference. As long as you work smart and travel safe you will not regret it.

I can proudly say that when I left Vanuatu the three staff that I had worked with were in a position to effectively manage the Epi High School Library. I had trained other school staff and students how to use the library, and taught the library monitors how to be library assistants.

If you are interested in getting involved in a volunteering program then the following programs may be worth looking into:

- Australian Business Volunteers (AVB) – <http://www.abv.org.au/>
- Australian Volunteers International (AVI) – <http://www.australianvolunteers.com/>
- Australian Youth Ambassadors for Development (AYAD) – <http://www.ayad.com.au/asp/home.aspx>
- Volunteering for International Development from Australia (ViDA) – <http://www.vidavolunteers.com.au/asp/home.aspx>
- Australian Law Librarians' Association Pacific Law Library Twinning Program – http://www.alla.asn.au/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=159&Itemid=462
- Dev-Zone, an independent New Zealand based resource centre on international development and global issues – <http://www.dev-zone.org/jobs/>

Photographs taken during my 5 months in Vanuatu can be viewed online here: http://flickr.com/photos/katie_hannan/collections/72157601947726418/.

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Katie Hannan is currently working as a liaison librarian at CSU in Wagga. She presented a paper on her experience in Vanuatu at the New Librarians Symposium 4, which can be viewed on NLS4 website in late January.

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...gives a voice to the new generation of library and information professionals. If you have any suggestions or topics for this column, please contact the column co-ordinator Naomi Doessel, naomi.doessel@au.ey.com