

THE HISTORY OF THE DAMASCUS COLLEGE CONNECTIONS



Early Days

In 1992 St Martin's in the Pines was approached by David MacPhail of the Community Aid Abroad (now Oxfam) Ballarat Branch to see if the College would be able to provide assistance for a gathering of East Timorese from the greater Melbourne area to catch up with each other. They were largely escapees from the invading Indonesian military regime that had been an oppressive occupying force since the departure of the Portuguese colonial power in

1975. Abel Guterres led the group, who used College facilities to enable their reunion. Abel was a hope filled man with a vision for a new beginning for his country. In May 2010 Abel presented his credentials to the Australian Governor General as Ambassador of Timor-Leste. The East Timor cause for independence was a regular feature of the social justice agenda at St Martin's in the Pines and then on into Damascus College.

Bernard Bradbury wrote the ten year almanac of Damascus College – *Into the Light* (1994) - and recalled the East Timor links.

For most of us absorbed in the routines and pressures of everyday life, it is hard to imagine life beyond work, home and leisure. Perhaps this is even more the case, living in Ballarat, which in many ways seems so remote from the rest of the world. This is especially so for our students who often have not experienced life outside Ballarat. The presence of exchange students and teachers in the school has certainly helped to extend our gaze beyond Australia, but it has been the connection with East Timor, and later with West Papua, which has really helped students and staff to imagine a world radically different to their own.

In 1999, the College welcomed East Timorese Bishop Belo, the 1996 Nobel Peace Prize winner. His



visit was a memorable occasion. It cemented what had become a special tie between Damascus College and the Sisters of Mercy with East Timor. A small group of East Timorese students had arrived led by Jose da Costa in 1998. In the following year Nicolau Fraga, Sancho da Silva and Ellya Lay arrived. As a young man in East Timor, Jose had been through the Dili massacre, seen his family suffer dreadfully, and was tortured by Indonesian soldiers. He was finally forced

to flee his country with Nicolau in an open and leaky boat, sailing across the ocean until they reached Darwin. Quietly, without fanfare, Jose and his fellow countrymen and women educated the whole school community about the difficulties of poverty and the horrors of war. They together with Bishop Belo made a great impact on the College and were an inspiration to all.

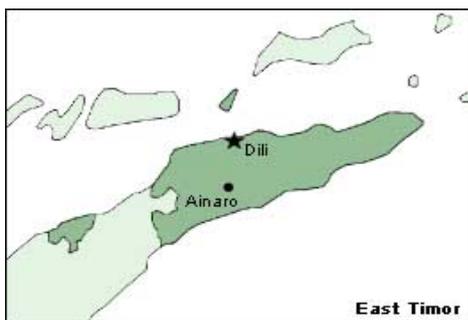


Mr John Shannon, the then principal of Damascus College 1995-2004; Sister Beverley Malcolm, now deceased, from the Sisters of Mercy; Bishop Peter Connors, the Catholic bishop of Ballarat are among those named by the then MP for Ballarat Michael Ronaldson in the Australian House of Representatives (*Hansard* Tuesday, 21 September 1999, page 10088) as founding members of Ballarat Region Friends of East Timor out of which both Ballarat Friends of Ainaro Community

Committee (BFACC) and Australia East Timor Association (AETA) Ballarat Branch grew. Michael Ronaldson would later visit Damascus College to speak with students about the Parliamentarians for East Timor Committee and the 25 year struggle for independence.

Support Grows

Through those early days Damascus College developed ongoing links with East Timor, particularly through the foundational work of Sr. Anne Forbes RSM, Sr. Maryanne Dwyer RSM and John Shannon, who took a personal interest in the education of these students. The College also provided work and support for another East Timorese refugee, Celestino De Araujo. Sr. Anne had risked life and limb in East Timor, during the period of the occupation. When the students were at Damascus she and Sr. Maryanne were chief among their minders. John Shannon, as principal of a very young Damascus College, took on the responsibility of the East Timorese students' immediate educational needs, supporting teaching staff and supporting the sisters in their efforts to accommodate, feed and clothe them. The visit of Bishop Belo was largely in recognition of these efforts. Sr. Maryanne would soon see that her ministry should be with the East Timorese people on their small island home. She works continuously in Aileu in East Timor, and returned to Ballarat with visitors for the World Youth Days in the Diocese 2008.



From about the time of independence on East Timor, Sr. Rita Hayes RSM, then congregational leader of the Sisters of Mercy, was using the college office and many other offices in town as a vendors for East Timor coffee. The coffee bean was proving to be their major source of international income for the fledgling nation. Soon after the Belo visit, the East Timor Action Group (ETAG) at Damascus College came into being under the watchful eye of staff member, Ann Gleeson, who was able to arrange many shipments of school related equipment to East Timor as well as a pen pal system for some English students. They were always a small but willing group. By 2005 Damascus College through the BFACC was linked with a school in East Timor, Santa Maria in Ainaro.

This link was fostered by and focused the work of ETAG. There were also important links with the St Aloysius



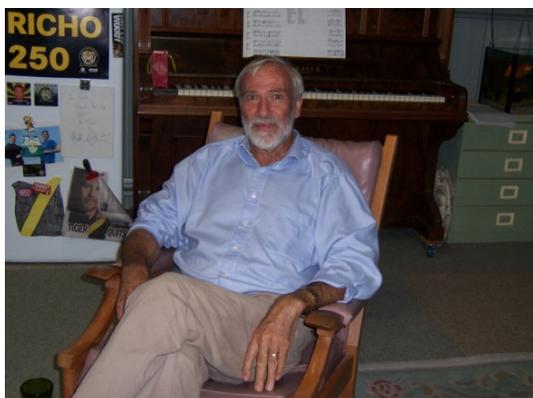
Parish Redan's *Ballarat/Ainaro English Support Program* also known as *Teachers 4 Timor (T4T)*. Bronwyn McNamee spoke with Damascus students about the project and she became a significant contributor to the cause of education in Ainaro. Tony Barrett continued the work of ETAG until his departure from Damascus College at the end of 2008. In 2009, the college sent many boxes of bibles to East Timor through the BFACC connections with Rotary. It was a proud and sad moment for many to see our Jose da Costa performing in the movie *Balibo* (2009), which re-enacted the events surrounding the death of journalists and the invasion of 1975.

From Sister School to Immersion

When working on the future of Damascus College as part of the implementation of the then new Vision and Mission Statements 2009-2015, the strategic planning group nominated the sister school relationship as an area of priority. After seeing the movie *Balibo* and attending a public forum in the Trench Room at the Town Hall about the sister city relationship in late 2009, Tony Haintz, then Religious Education Coordinator, applied to join Ballarat Friends of Ainaro Community Committee (BFACC). There he found Bernard Bradbury, retired from teaching but on the Damascus College Board Inc, and Rob Gray from Ballarat Grammar and the Teachers for Timor and the Ballarat Ainaro Friendship Schools. Here was a group with connections that would assist the College to rekindle its relationship with our sister school.

Retired as a priest of the Catholic Diocese of Ballarat and so from being head of the Caritas for the diocese, Gerry Baldock had become a regular teacher in the interactive English program for adults in Ainaro that he helped establish - *English Teachers for East Timor*.

That program is a fully documented curriculum delivered at three levels – introductory, preliminary and intermediate. Those teachers involved are volunteers from Australia, who move to Ainaro for a period of eight weeks to deliver the program. Most years there have been four terms of the course and the adult students travel from the district to participate. There was a comfortable but simple house that the teacher's rent. There was only electricity for a couple of hours each day until 2013. Past students of Damascus College, Renita Murnane and Taryn Williams have been part of this program.



Gerry's familiarity with the area and the school with which Damascus College is partnered, Santa Maria, afforded an opportunity too good to miss. In discussions with Tony Haintz, Gerry agreed to act as a go-between for Damascus with Santa Maria. Gerry knew Fr. Lito, the principal of the school and its deputy principal and teacher of English, Celestino Antonio, personally. He brokered discussion in Ainaro in early April 2010. The nature of the discussion is on the model recommended by Caritas International – namely to listen to the needs of the people and to discuss with

them the possibilities for partnership.

Discussions with Gerry suggest that the midyear break in Australia is an ideal time to visit Ainaro (our summer is the wet season in Timor Leste). With careful planning including visits by Damascus staff

members in 2010, Gerry felt that it may be possible to have a small group of students visit in mid-2011. Gerry's suggestion was that our students might like to assist with the English program using the resources that are already in place.

Then recently appointed deputy-principal Matthew Byrne had come from Echuca at the start of 1999 and was aware that St Joseph's College Echuca were planning an immersion experience in the middle of 2010. He sought a place for Tony Haintz on the first Echuca immersion. The plan was to build on Gerry Baldock's discussions with an in-country investigation of the possibilities of a Damascus College



immersion in 2011. Tony spent a good deal of time with Sr Mary Anne Dwyer RSM in Aileu before heading to Ainaro. Loretta Kaval was visiting her daughter in Timor Leste during that same mid-year break in 2010. Loretta and Lucinda met with Tony in Ainaro and were introduced to key people at Santa Maria, especially Fr Lito and Celestino Antonio. The Echuca immersion was the model that would be adapted for Damascus College by Tony Haintz and Loretta Kaval in early 2011 and used successfully for six years.

On June 20th June 2016 the sixth Damascus College Timor-Leste Immersion became a reality for ten enthusiastic Year 11 students and four equally excited staff. Following the St Joseph's model, the group supported by their families had been preparing for nine months. The farewell tears at the bus terminal in Ballarat spoke to the heart of the immersion process - stepping out from the familiar and the known into the unfamiliar and new, in love to serve. A myriad of fundraising ventures and associated cultural learning meant that the team was ready to hand over more than \$12,000 in donations to people making a difference in Timor-Leste. Over the period of the program in excess of \$60,000 has been left on the ground in Timor-Leste, with people who are making a difference.