



AMSSA

AUSTRALASIAN MERCY SECONDARY SCHOOLS ASSOCIATION

<http://www.amssa.mercy.org.au>

Email: amssa@mercy.org.au

Newsletter April 2014 No. 01/14

This issue:

Page 1: News from the AMSSA Executive

Page 2: All Hallows Brisbane – Listen and Learn

Page 4: Santa Maria College – Cambodia Immersion and Punmu

Page 8: Mercedes College – Perth Poverty Immersion

Page 11: OLMC Parramatta – Cambodia Immersion

Page 13: Prayer

News from the AMSSA Executive

The AMSSA Executive met in Melbourne in early March to discuss plans for 2014 – 2015. The two key events on the agenda were the Student Conference to be held in Victoria from October 3-7 and the Staff Conference to be held in Adelaide from August 13-15 2015.

The Student Conference Planning Group met in Melbourne in mid March to plan a great conference for our students. The conference will be subsidised by AMSSA and details will be sent to schools early in Term 2. We are looking at a strong representation from all our schools.

Paddy McEvoy and her team in Adelaide have begun their planning for the Staff Conference so please ensure that you save the date for 2015.

The theme of our newsletter is Student Immersions. Thank you to Santa Maria College and Mercedes College in WA, All Hallows in Brisbane and Our Lady of Mercy College, Parramatta for the articles and photos in the newsletter. The theme for the Term 2 Newsletter is Mercy Day and other Special Days of Celebration. Please send in your articles and photos early in Term 2.

Kitty Guerin
Executive Officer

LISTEN AND LEARN – ALL HALLOWS BRISBANE



Nine nights, twenty one students, three teachers, three Red Earth Connections volunteers, one exquisite starry sky, hundreds of elusive Bennett's tree kangaroos, one composting toilet, one creek for bathing, three smoking ceremonies, eight tents, zero electricity, one campfire, two shovels, two mattocks, one hundred and sixty three seedlings, one wheelbarrow, three indigenous communities, one forest night walk, one garden, one yarning circle, one heart, one spirit, one people, twelve crocodiles, three fish, one goanna, one bush tracker, countless songs, one wise Bana woman, four bus drivers, two pastors, three satellite phones, zero mobile phones, zero internet, infinite love, laughter, gratitude, listening and learning...a simple summation of the experiences of the staff and students who visited the indigenous communities of Wujal Wujal, Bana Yarrilji and Hopevale during the June holidays. It is also a vastly inadequate summation. Mere words cannot even nearly encapsulate the profound impact that this immersion had on each of its participants.

Immersion is about being with the other and in so being to experience a hitherto unknown, ignored or seemingly impossible relationship. Immersion provides the opportunity to grow our understanding and appreciation of the oneness of humanity which can so often be unrecognised by our western emphasis on duality and difference.

In June/July 2013 a group of twenty one All Hallows' students, three teachers and three volunteers from Red Earth Connections ventured into the indigenous lands of Cape York. There we were welcomed onto the lands and into the hearts of the local indigenous people. We learned about the infinite beauty and intrinsic value of a land which holds the stories and the spirit of an ancient people. We learned from the wisdom of Marilyn Wallace – a tribal elder of Bana Yarrilji, a woman on a mission to bring sustenance and life to her people, a woman of immense integrity, openness and spirit.

We learned the challenge and the liberation that comes from putting aside for a while a little of our obsession with material things. We learned the worth and humility that comes from opening ourselves to the other. We learned that love and laughter and tears and faith are at the essence of humanity and that in realising this we must become more authentically compassionate people. We learned that hard work done collaboratively can realise previously unimagined outcomes. We learned that justice is a complex imperative which is more than worth our absolute determination in its achievement. We learned our human story is a shared story.

We learned that we must use our education to become advocates for a world which is experienced as peaceful and just for all people. We learned that our education is vastly enhanced when it beckons us into the world of the other and so motivates us to reject the discrimination, hatred, indifference and lack of compassion which arise from our separation of 'us from them'. Christine Clarke





SANTA MARIA COLLEGE CAMBODIA VOLUNTEER PROGRAM

A group of eighteen Year 12 graduate students and two staff members from Santa Maria College recently returned from the College's first Cambodia Volunteer Program, a service immersion trip that saw them lending a hand to those in need. Mrs Helen Chaffer and Mrs Dianne Valentine were the two staff members who accompanied the girls on this trip.

Beginning in Siem Reap, the group spent two days with Sister Denise Coghlan at the Sisters of Mercy Mission. Here they assisted in the making of wheelchairs for Cambodians affected by landmines and visited some villages where they helped build two communal toilet blocks and planted mango trees. Following this, they travelled to the capital, Phnom Penh, where they visited an orphanage and saw first-hand the plight of many orphans and the daily struggles they face.

When they weren't busy helping out the locals, the group was able to indulge in some sightseeing, visiting the Anlong Veng District, the Temples of Angkor and the infamous Tuol Sleng Prison.

The girls described the experience as a once in a lifetime opportunity. In a presentation for the College they explained how "the Cambodia Volunteer Program is an eye-opening experience which gives you the opportunity to immerse yourself in a different culture and become aware of the issue of poverty in our world. Building wells and toilets along with regular manual labour is a daily reality with no hesitation or complaints. It has encouraged us to continue our work of service and charity outside the College community and be more in tune with issues of social poverty and deprivation in our world."

One Year 12 graduate, Grace Grier, reflected on the program, "I learnt so much more about valuing life and what we have. Some parts of the trip were quite confronting but at the same time allowed us to develop our knowledge and experience of the world. The trip overall allowed us to gain independence and to see the world from a different perspective, seeing families that have close to nothing showed me how insignificant material goods really are."

The Cambodia Volunteer Program will be running again in December 2014.

Upon reflection of the trip, Mrs Dianne Valentine says,

"Unfortunately, the local paper made a slight error in the photo caption, reporting that the girls chose to travel to Cambodia in preference to Leavers week. Although this was certainly true for many of the graduates, there were others in the group that also attended Leavers prior to this trip. The intention was to offer this trip as an alternative to

Leavers and with future trips we hope this will become a reality.

The girls were eager to learn about the history of Cambodia and how this has impacted on the lives of those who live in this country. They commented on the resilience of the Cambodian people and way in which they were so warmly welcomed into their homes. They enjoyed working on projects such as building wheelchairs, constructing a toilet block, digging soak wells and planting mango trees in a small village. As is the case in many voluntary situations the girls felt they gained as much out of this trip as they gave.

As a staff member the experience allowed me to observe our graduates in very unfamiliar surrounds where they were often placed well outside their comfort zone, yet to their credit, these young women responded positively to each new adventure. It was an interesting age group to take on an immersion program as it encouraged them to seek opportunities to combine their travels, post-school with a service based activity. Many of the girls are now at the stage of their lives where they are seeking a connection between their school-based activities and what is on offer as they head to university or work. This program aimed to provide this link. We are presently planning future trips and look forward to providing this opportunity once again to our 2014 leavers."



TRIP TO PUNMU

On Saturday 3 August, twelve Year 11 students and three teachers flew out to Punmu. We arrived in Port Hedland and went to St Cecilia's Church for Mass. The following morning we set off for our 9.5-hour drive to Punmu. We were greeted by the RAWA School Principal, Wendy, and met many of the kids. On Monday morning we joined in on sport with the kids. When they went to class we repainted the walls of the school and did some weeding for the new grass area. We helped the kids to read and then introduced ourselves to the Middle and Senior School students. After school, one of the local girls took us out to the salt lake and told us many of the local customs.

Sam & Eliza

On Tuesday, we were immersed into the culture of the Martu people. Part of the day was spent learning some basic Martu language such as 'yarrani' for 'come here' and 'lungi' for witchety grubs. Perhaps the most exciting part of the day was our 'lungi' hunting, led by Nancy, one of the elders. We all held witchety grubs, although few were brave enough to actually eat them! The drive back to the school was across the salt lake, with a stop at the healing pools or 'moon pools' along the way. We ended the day with a fascinating visit to the stunning Punmu Hill, in the company of many of the community's elders and children. We were very grateful to be so welcomed into their community and that everyone was so willing to share their culture and knowledge with us. Although it was only the second day in Punmu, we were already looking forward to the rest of the week and could not wait to learn and experience more.

Jade & Leah

On 7 August we enjoyed our weekly exercise in the form of the Punmu Athletics Carnival and Fun Run. The run was very different to the Santa Maria Cross Country, with the red dirt track. The blazing sun did not affect the fun of the day with games such as spry-ball and an obstacle course. As the carnival concluded, we stayed back for some homemade pizza or a 'feed' as we now call it. As the evening approached, we headed to Punmu Hill for a liturgy where we reflected and gave thanks for our time in Punmu.

Simona & Amber



On 8 August, everyone showed their creative side when we did Art Day at RAWA. This included clay moulding, canvas painting, basket weaving, and murals around the school. We designed and painted three doors featuring kangaroos, a snake, and an eagle. After doing these separately, we combined our efforts to create a main mural. This consisted of the Rainbow Snake and features of the Punmu community while incorporating numeracy to encourage a positive attitude towards Mathematics. The day was enjoyed by all and the students were freely able to show their skill.

Alex & Maddy

Friday was our last day with the kids at the RAWA school, and we started off with our daily sport. They loved the game of continuous basketball. The twelve girls and three teachers worked together to help clean up the school and finish last minute jobs to help out the school. We were then given an amazing opportunity to visit the clay pen. There was mud, water, fire and red dirt flying everywhere. The Senior students and the elders showed us how to cook our own damper. It was a wonderful experience. In the afternoon we played some more sport with the kids to enjoy as much time as we could with them. We then had the DISCO! We played lots of up beat music, had lights flashing and everyone was up and dancing. We finished the night with a Martu song that all the kids joined in and sang. It was very sad to say our goodbyes. On Saturday morning we were up bright and early to hit the road running. We were very lucky as some of the kids came to say their last goodbyes and we then packed up and began our drive home. On the road again, songs, jokes and running between cars got us through to Port Headland, where the final leg saw us arrive home safely. A wonderful experience, with many memories made, was sadly over.

MERCEDES COLLEGE PERTH

LOCAL IMMERSION EXPERIENCE – PERTH POVERTY IMMERSION

Mercedes College is in a unique position in that it is Perth's only inner-city school. Founded in 1846, it originally sat on the periphery of the developing city. Over the past 30 years this area has undergone urban renewal. While most of the old homes and light industry have been replaced by hotels, residential apartments and restaurants, the displaced and poor have remained. As students make their way to school they are witness to the queues at charity run soup vans, people sleeping rough and begging. Drop-in centres, hostels, medical, legal and support services for the poor and disconnected dot the neighbourhood and act as a constant reminder that material and spiritual poverty exists in our city.

Passing through the city everyday Mercedes College students are eye witnesses to the poverty that exists in our city, but how many of us turn a blind eye?

The College's Reconciliation and Mercy Service-Learning Policies encourage members of the school community to befriend our neighbours and take opportunities to glimpse and better understand the needs of those people who are marginalized. It was this environment that led the College to introduce a local immersion experience in 2007. The Perth Poverty Immersion takes students into their own neighbourhood, to encounter the poor and examine the services and agencies that support them.

The program is conducted over 3 ½ days, twice a year. Ten Year 11 students from Mercedes College and up to four students from other schools participate in each program. Selection is by application. The students are supported by a team of teachers, ancillary staff, parents and an external facilitator, Tracy Pollett. Tracy brings her own story to the program. She is a Maori woman who has experienced physical and racial abuse and poverty. Her circumstances led her to gangs and a time living on the streets in New Zealand. In her adult life she has found comfort and strength as a mother, grandmother and human rights advocate.

We listened to the tragedies and triumphs of an exceptional lady called Tracy and realised how lucky and blessed our lives are.



The program begins with an afternoon in a local park, Wellington Square. Historically this park has been a meeting place for Aboriginal people. Today Aboriginal patients from the local public hospital take time out to relax under the trees or meet up with family. It is also a location where the homeless can be assured of breakfast and an evening cup of soup from the Red Cross and Salvation Army vans. Mercedes College also uses the park for sporting games and training. Two years ago a Perth Poverty Immersion student created a project providing afternoon tea to the Big Issue Street Soccer team that plays at Wellington Square. This project was so successful that it has grown to become a project for future Perth Poverty Immersion participants and the College social justice group, Young Mercies. Students, staff, parents and friends cook and serve an evening meal every second Tuesday for the players and anyone else in the park. Sixty to eighty meals are packaged. Some clients take extra meals away for another day or family.

Following the visit to Wellington Square, students break into small groups to explore inner-city services and locations used by the homeless. This includes the Street Doctor, soup patrol and a midnight walk through the almost deserted shopping mall where the groups often encounter people sleeping in doorways and lanes. The evening program concludes with a visit to a 24 hour take-away store that offers some of the homeless with a refuge from the weather and dangers on the street, provided they can afford to purchase a food item to consume on-site. The students express surprise that the homeless are so willing to chat with them. The stories they hear highlight that homelessness and poverty can happen so easily.

We were fortunate to meet people who were willing to share their story:

Matt – a 21 year old drag queen, Jess – a 19 year old mother, and River – an old gentleman who was happy to talk about his life on the streets and cautioned us about the dangers we might encounter.

The first night is an over-night stay. The students sleep out in the school grounds.

We experienced first-hand what it was like to sleep outdoors on Tuesday night, and although uncomfortable for us, it was nowhere near as uncomfortable as it would be in reality for those who are genuinely homeless.

Over the next three days the participants visit a range of services including the SVDP Depot, observe proceedings in the Magistrate's Court, serve breakfast from soup vans and hostels, meet with clients at drop-in-centres and complete small service projects that assist the poor, migrants, refugees, Aboriginal people and homeless youth. There is also time dedicated to lessons and reflection.



At the conclusion of the program students create individual or group service-learning projects that will address some aspect of where they have seen a genuine need. The

experience has a profound effect on the participants, including the adult helpers. The opportunity to hear the stories and take time to understand another point of view promotes tolerance and empathy. Teachers and parents regularly report the enthusiasm and voice for justice given to the participants, who show a new understanding of the issue being encountered on a daily basis on the school's doorstep.

We were changed, even at the most basic level of opening our eyes, to the issue of homelessness in our city.

It was an experience that's touched everyone's hearts and developed a sense of empathy within us that will encourage us to continue our lives as women of Mercy.

The Perth Poverty Immersion program has been endorsed by the School Curriculum and Standards Authority of Western Australia and counts towards the WA Certificate of Education. Students complete over 90 hours of service and learning through the 3 ½ immersion days and on-going projects and reflection.

Christine Aldous

OLMC PARRAMATTA - CAMBODIA IMMERSION

On January 12, 2014 Sydney airport saw fourteen sleepy, happy-pants wearing, OLMC girls and three exhausted-looking teachers- who had spent 16days in Cambodia, return back home with wide smiles, laughter and the satisfaction of knowing that they had made some positive change to the world and to the lives of others over the course of the past two weeks.

It all started at Sydney International airport at 5am on December 28, 2013, where we, the Cambodian Immersion Trip team 2013-14, boarded a flight. Departing Sydney and arriving in Singapore we proved to be quite a spectacle with our striking (and very attractive) matching shirts, this resulted in us being questioned on what sporting team we were, leading to the group's double identity as the thumb wrestling/in-flight bowling/lacrosse champions of Australia. From Singapore we travelled to Phnom Penh, Cambodia, where we were received joyfully by our tour guide and big sister for the trip, Xuyen and our local tour guide, Mr Hong. We headed out to have our first taste of Khmer cuisine for dinner.

Our first day in Phnom Penh involved visiting the Royal Palace, the National Museum, the central market where we all experienced bartering first hand and finally Wat Phnom where we learnt how the city was founded. Our second day in Phnom Penh was a real insight into the country's gruelling history when it suffered under the Khmer Rouge. That day we visited, a former, high school-turned- prison (S21-Prison), the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum. The experience was a highly confronting and emotional one, as we were informed about the victims, the prisoners and the torture that had occurred there. We also had the opportunity of meeting two of the survivors of the S21-Prison, who shared their stories with us. From the museum we made our way to the Killing Fields. The burial site of thousands killed during the regime is now commemorated through an enormous Stupa. The day was a very challenging one emotionally, but nonetheless an

important aspect of understanding and immersing ourselves in the cultural history of the people of Cambodia.



On December 31, we took a day's bus trip to Sihanoukville on the coast. As it was New Years Eve after dinner we made our way onto the beach to celebrate and we released three beautiful lanterns into the night sky along with the hundreds released by the locals and also enjoyed some fireworks. We went back to the hotel and waited for the Cambodian New Year on the rooftop, whilst watching the amazing fireworks that were set off on the beach. New Year's Day we were up bright and early to enjoy a boat ride which took us out to an island, where we were given the opportunity to snorkel over a reef, and were served delicious lunch on a picturesque beach.

The next day gave us the opportunity to explore more fully the social justice aspect of the trip. We visited M'LopTapang, a foundation centred on bettering the lives of children, taking them off the streets and providing them with education as well as meals and places to sleep. We were given the wonderful opportunity of visiting their classes and teaching some Basic English through fun games. We also visited M'LopTapang's training centres for teenagers and young adults, and learnt of what occupational skills they provided, in order for them to earn an income and attain a better standard of living. We were able to use some of the funds we raised to buy the organisation a machine for printing patterns on shirts which they could use to generate income from to further support other endeavours and we also donated money to supply rice for the children's lunches.

The following couple of days involved bus trips, from Sihanoukville back to Phnom Penh and then from Phnom Penh to Siem Reap. Siem Reap began the second leg of our immersion, we bid farewell to Mr Hong and greeted our local guide for Siem Reap, Yous-Sa.

Siem Reap offered us the opportunity to explore the extravagant, huge, spectacular Angkor Temples, World Heritage sites built from the 9th to the 15th century. We explored the main and the largest temple, Angkor Wat and then Ta Prohm (where the Tomb Raider was filmed) where we all struck our best Lara Croft poses, Preah Khan (where Indiana Jones was filmed) along with many other smaller temples. The temples were truly awe inspiring pieces of architecture with rich history which we all took great delight in exploring.

We also visited the Tonle Sap Lake where we took a boat trip out to see and visit Cambodian floating villages. These families rarely ever come onto the mainland giving us a glimpse into new lifestyles completely unlike our own.

We had the amazing opportunity to visit a Mercy Sister, Sister Denise and the reflection centre that she operates 'Metta Karuna'. The centre focuses on establishing interfaith dialogue, providing aid to refugees, supporting education in remote areas and helping the victims of landmines. This was a very inspirational and reflective experience.

The day before we started our building project, we visited COSO (Cambodian Orphan Save Organisation) and spent a day there interacting and playing with the children. They were all so welcoming, and treated us like their sisters. Their joy and enthusiasm, despite having so little, was heart-warming and had a profound impact on all of us. It was truly a gift to be able to spend a day with such wonderful, kind people. We wished to help the orphanage so we donated some of our funds to go towards buying them a motorbike which could become a atuk-tuk and be used to transport the children to school and brand new bedding. We also gave them money which was used to replace the worn roofing of their homes and to help supply food.

The last three days of our trip were devoted to the construction of a house for a family in a small village. The family of eleven had been living in a tiny hut with walls made of dried palm leaves. The house we built was sturdy, made of hardwood and tin. Being able to give someone a home, something which we had created, and to know what a profound change to their life we had made was a true highlight of the trip. We provided the house with bedding and cooking supplies. We also gave 50kg bags of rice to every family in the community as well as donating some of our own belongings.

The OLMC immersion trip went for sixteen days, and immersion is the perfect way to describe the journey. Every day we woke up to new experiences which gave us the opportunity to learn, discover and share the vibrant Cambodian culture. We would wake up every morning excited, (despite the early starts) for the day to come with the knowledge we would be able to explore some completely new facet of life and to have the satisfaction of feeling you had bettered someone's life by what you did in that day. It was an experience which challenged all of us to be more, and left us enriched and joyful. The immersion was a gift, and it is one which we will hold close to us forever.



PRAYER

'Loving God, we seek you with our whole heart and soul. May our Lenten pilgrimage bring us to Easter joy, along the path of prayer and good works. We make our request in the name of Jesus who has gone before us in the way of salvation. Amen'

Morning Prayer for the First, Third and Fifth Wednesdays in Lent from Morning and Evening Prayer of the Sisters of Mercy.

From Mercy E- News March 2014