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Undercover aid workers

Bill Simpson

With the help of their church, a Brisbane family is giving young people in East Timor an education they could never afford themselves. Bill Simpson reports

'I made a vow to support these people, no matter what' - Arie van Klinken

ARIE van Klinken is one of those people who deserve space in a newspaper. They don't seek the attention. Usually, they're embarrassed by it.

Talk to them and they will tell you that what they do is no big deal, really. You know it is. Their efforts in the interest of others are an inspiration and an example to the rest of us.

You listen to the likes of van Klinken, a 1960s immigrant to Australia, and think: "Hey, I could do that."

What he does from his modest home in a modest Brisbane suburb is raise money to ensure that up to 150 young people from poor families in East Timor get a formal education. Van Klinken has no official fundraising experience. He achieves through compassion and commitment.

There's not a huge amount of money involved, he says. Fees are small by Australian standards, but insurmountable for East Timorese families who survive from the produce of their land.

A few hundred Australian dollars will put a young East Timorese student through college. Van Klinken's challenge is to find Australians who will contribute.

Arie van Klinken, his wife, Anneke, and four children emigrated to Australia from Holland in 1964. They settled in Taringa, in Brisbane's western suburbs. Two children were added to the family after their arrival.

Within 12 months of buying their Brisbane home, the couple bought a catering business. Six years later, they took over a suburban motel, which they sold last year after 30 years of operation.

It sounds very much like an average sort of story about an average sort of family passing through life in an average Brisbane suburb. But theirs is really a remarkable tale of a couple making a difference in the lives of others without any fuss -- unacclaimed achievers.

The seed of van Klinken's desire to support the East Timorese was planted in Indonesia, in 1956. At the time, he was working as a senior police officer in Dutch New Guinea, then part of Indonesia. He stayed until 1962, when he returned to Holland.

Two years later, the family was living in Brisbane. Van Klinken was stunned when the Indonesian army invaded East Timor in 1975. He knew from personal experience that Indonesians, generally, were not anti-East Timorese.

He watched events closely. In 1989, as the doors of East Timor were opened ever so slightly to overseas visitors, van Klinken made his first trip there. Something was compelling him to go, he says.

What he saw distressed him. The poverty and misery of the East Timorese were overwhelming.

"The unbelievable hardship and cruelty made a very deep impression," he says. "I made a vow then to support these people, no matter what. I had not discussed this with anybody and clearly at that time had not the slightest idea what that vow would mean."

As a Christian, van Klinken was interested initially to see how the church in East Timor was surviving under Indonesian occupation. He was surprised to discover that the Indonesian army had identified East Timorese and any visitors with a religious attachment as safe. Anybody not having a religious connection was considered a communist and, therefore, an enemy of Indonesia.

The East Timorese churches were anxious to have their pastors learn English. Van Klinken convinced fellow members of his Indooroopilly Uniting Church to sponsor the first candidate, who came to Brisbane for three months.

Six pastors have since been financed in the same way. A number of other young people have been financially supported to study theology in Indonesia.

More needed to be done. Van Klinken and members of a small scholarships committee he formed turned their attention to a college study scheme. Although it is not an official Uniting Church program, it is run under the organisation's umbrella to ensure adequate auditing is maintained.

By 1999, the group was financially supporting 10 students studying agriculture, economics and medicine at universities in East Timor and Indonesia.

East Timorese voted for independence the same year. Schools and colleges which were closed during the Indonesian occupation reopened and the need to assist East Timorese students to study increased.

One of the many achievers is Constantino Pinto. His story is one of amazing survival, as well as success -- forced with his family from their home as a five-year-old, brought up in the bush for the next four years, sent to a concentration camp at nine and hounded by the Indonesian army for his ongoing opposition to the occupation.

Yet, in 1992, with the financial support of the Brisbane group, including Oxley parish of the Uniting Church, Pinto started his studies in social politics at the University of East Timor. He completed all course work for his degree in 1999.

Further harassment during the Indonesian army's forced withdrawal from East Timor in late 1999 caused him to bury his study documents and flee by fishing boat to another island.

When he returned, he found his house and everything in it had been destroyed by fire. The university also had been set on fire and records lost. Fortunately, the documents he had buried in his back yard were still intact. They were accepted by the university and he will officially graduate this year.

Pinto is now head of YASONA, the social aid arm of protestant churches in East Timor. He has a staff of 27. YASONA'S main programs are humanitarian, focusing on people who lost their homes or returned from the forests after the Indonesian army left.

Meanwhile, van Klinken and his team are working on another stage of their student support program. With trade and nursing schools being rebuilt after many were destroyed as the Indonesian army left, the Brisbane support group is raising funds to finance students in these courses, as well.

A young student in East Timor recently asked van Klinken how long he would maintain the education support program. Van Klinken said he would help until he died.

"Then, we must pray for a long life for you," the student said.

Anybody wanting to make contact with the support group can call Arie van Klinken on 3870 2128