

TOGETHER, WE

TRANSFORM

Rotary  PEOPLE OF ACTION



Terapo school students with books and stationery.

Books

by the bucket load

Poor literacy, especially in English, is a major problem in Papua New Guinea. To help address this issue, the Rotary Club of Kenthurst, NSW, has been filling the country's schools and libraries with books, computers, stationery and other school supplies since 2011.

ENGLISH in PNG is taught from elementary school upwards, yet standards have significantly deteriorated since independence was obtained in 1975. Libraries are poorly stocked or non-existent in many areas, further inhibiting local education.

“From my experience, Grade 10 students in the West Sepik Province of PNG write and understand English at the equivalent level of Year 4 in Australia,” said Karo Haltmeier, who hails from the area, and has been a member of the Rotary Club of Kenthurst, NSW, for the past nine years.

This poor literacy has serious consequences, as English is the language of business and all other formal aspects of life in PNG, including government policy and development plans. Without English skills, PNG people are significantly restricted from participating in politics, economic opportunities and the justice system.

Karo inspired her club to help address this problem, by sending educational resources to Vanimo High School and primary schools.

“We started with Vanimo because it was the town I grew up in and the main town with all political and administrative government offices of the West Sepik Province. I personally knew the people and public servants there who could help with the project.”

In 2011, the Rotary Club of Kenthurst filled a 20-foot shipping container with books, stationery, computers and other school supplies. They also included medical supplies worth \$5000 for Vanimo General Hospital.

In 2013, another 20-foot container was sent containing similar items – but with the addition of purpose-built, low-power-consumption computers with pre-loaded encyclopaedias, thanks to the students of Castle Hill TAFE. These were sent to Green River Station, a remote government service centre near the Indonesian border, approximately a 45-minute flight by bush plane from Vanimo. The Provincial Department of Education in Vanimo contributed by chartering two flights to transport these books and computers to the Green

River Primary School, High School and Elementary School.

Over the two years, these two projects delivered books and stationery to a total of 26 schools in the West Sepik Province.

Later, during a self-funded trip to Papua New Guinea, Karo visited the National Library in Port Moresby. She was surprised to find the library had very few books, and the books they did have on the shelves were torn and damaged.

So, in 2015, the Rotary Club of Kenthurst sent yet another 20-foot container to Port Moresby. Part of the shipment of books went to the National Library and the rest to four schools in the Malalaua District, Gulf Province, in the southwest of PNG. Malalaua can be reached by a four-hour drive from Port Moresby, yet these schools had no library books at all.

The club’s next project emerged when Karo was on the road helping deliver books to the Malalaua schools. She came across a brand-new library built by mobile phone company Digicel. Yet the library itself was completely empty. Digicel was approached with the offer of partnership – the Rotary Club of Kenthurst would provide the books, and Digicel agreed to meet all the shipping and transportation costs.

The project turned into the biggest book collection in the Hills Shire District. Leaflets were sent out to three local newspapers, *The Kenthurst News*, *The Dooral Roundup* and the *Hills Shire Times*.

“The response was unbelievable – we were flooded with books,” Karo said. “One person used social media to do her own collection drive. Another bought bags and bags of brand-new children’s books for donation. An 11-year-old Kings College schoolboy knocked on doors in his neighbourhood to collect books they weren’t using anymore.”

Local schools in the area also stepped in; Carlingford Public School, Baulkham Hills Public School, Banks Public School, St. Clair, Burwood Girls High School, Mercy College Parramatta, Glenorie Public School, and many more.

Crestwood Public School in Baulkham Hills asked every child in the school to

bring a book or two. Dural 1st Scout Group also created a project called Helping Others to collect and donate books. Women’s gym Dural Curves became a collection point for their many clients.

The Rotary clubs of Beecroft, West Pennant Hills and Cherrybrook, Kiama, Galston, Nepean and Erina also donated books.

“Our club holds an annual book fair and we happily donated approximately 4000 leftover children’s books from the fair to the PNG Libraries project, organised by the Rotary Club of Kenthurst,” president of the Rotary Club of Beecroft Greg Keighran said.

Galston further donated two entire pallets of books – 42 boxes overall.

In November, a dozen members of the Rotary Club of Kenthurst and their family and friends gathered to ferry all the books from Karo’s garage to the container. It took two hours to stack the 1092 boxes, weighing 16 tonnes.

The books were received by the Digicel Foundation staff in Port Moresby and then shipped to the Autonomous Region of Bougainville to fill up seven school libraries.

Rotary can be proud it is boosting literacy for a generation of young people in PNG, which will have impact throughout the rest of their lives. •

Karo Haltmeier, of the Rotary Club of Kenthurst, left, and then president of the Rotary Club of West Pennant Hills & Cherrybrook Rosemary Clark.

