

Door to another world



There are incidents in life that open doors – sometimes we take them, sometimes not. With Hilary Smith, one VSA assignment led to another... and then another... until her passion for VSA became a 26-year commitment (so far). We spoke to her on the eve of her standing down as VSA's Council Chair.

RECORD OF A REMARKABLE RELATIONSHIP WITH VSA

- Tupou High School, Tonga – English teacher 1981-1982
- Ialibu High School, Papua New Guinea – English teacher 1984-1985
- Dong Dok Teachers' College, Lao PDR – English teacher 1988-1989 (co-sponsored with UNV)
- Ministry of Tourism, Lao PDR – English teacher 1990-1991 (co-sponsored with UNV)
- VSA Council 1992-2005
- VSA Council Chair 1996-2005



What prompted your interest in VSA in the first place?

I was always fascinated reading about life in other countries; an aunt was a missionary and from her and at Sunday School we heard marvellous stories about life in other countries; and, from neighbouring farms, Ian Armstrong and Wally and Rose Oakley were VSA volunteers. So I was aware of international work and VSA, although I don't think it occurred to me that I could or would volunteer myself.

When I was finishing my first degree I was keen to go overseas. I wasn't interested in travelling as such, I wanted to live and work overseas – and do something worthwhile – but I had no idea how to do that with a BA in psychology! When Jane Cookson was back in Christchurch for graduation from her assignment in Fiji, she came to tea at our flat and we talked about teaching in Pacific schools straight from university, which we could do in those days.

Why did you stand for VSA Council?

It was actually totally by chance. Before VSA changed to a postal voting system, the Council elections were held at the Annual General Meeting in Wellington. I went along in 1992 because I was studying in Wellington at the time and involved in the Wellington Branch. As I remember it, there weren't enough nominees for Council, so Marg Leniston tapped me on the shoulder and suggested I stand, and that was that.

What do you see as the most significant changes in VSA over the years you have been associated with the organisation?

In many fundamental ways I don't believe VSA has changed at all. For example, the reasons people choose to volunteer haven't changed, and the value of Kiwis exchanging skills with people in other countries is still recognised. I think the main changes are in the way we frame these things, now that volunteering has become part of a huge global aid and development industry. This has meant that we have had to become more professional in our approach throughout the organisation – the Chairperson's spouse is no longer responsible for providing lunch at Council meetings!

How has VSA influenced your own life and professional career?

The two have been closely intertwined. After my first assignment in Tonga I trained in teaching English as a Second Language, and I followed up with a second assignment

in Papua New Guinea because I was keen to put the theory into practice and have the experience of living and teaching in the bush. A few years later, I was approached for another assignment in teacher development in Laos, and I realised that I enjoy working at tertiary level. On a field visit, VSA's director Chris Hawley suggested I should get on with further study, and subsequently my Masters research was with the Lao community in Wellington. This introduced me to research and recently I have again been involved in a project with that community.

I have met many of my friends through VSA; local and expatriate colleagues and other volunteers in the field, and Branch and Council members at home. My work with VSA continues to be a real privilege, and I'm looking forward to carrying on my involvement at Branch level.

VSA looks forward to Hilary's continued involvement with the organisation, and thanks her for the devotion, commitment and direction she has given to VSA over 26 years.

top left: I was always amazed at how keen the students at Ialibu High School were, even after several hours of walking to school – often in the rain – an environment which, in 1985, was so different from their traditional village lives.

right (clockwise): It was always fun in 1981 Nuku'alofa when the cruise ships called and we could go down and buy handicrafts with tourists at the Boat Market. L-R Tupou High School colleague (and later VSA selection and briefing adviser) Suzanne Innes-Kent, me, VSA volunteer Raewyn Parker.

Water throwing is an essential part of Lao New Year, and in this picture I am sitting damply with colleagues after a baci ceremony in 1989 at Dong Dok Teachers' College (now the National University of Laos). My counterpart Bouasavanh Keovilay is on my right.

My Tongan colleagues at Tupou High School worked incredibly hard for the Free Wesleyan Church education system. L-R Ma'ata Havea, Siosina Moala, Taufa Taumoepeau.