Tisa: A Teacher's Experience in PNG 1962–75

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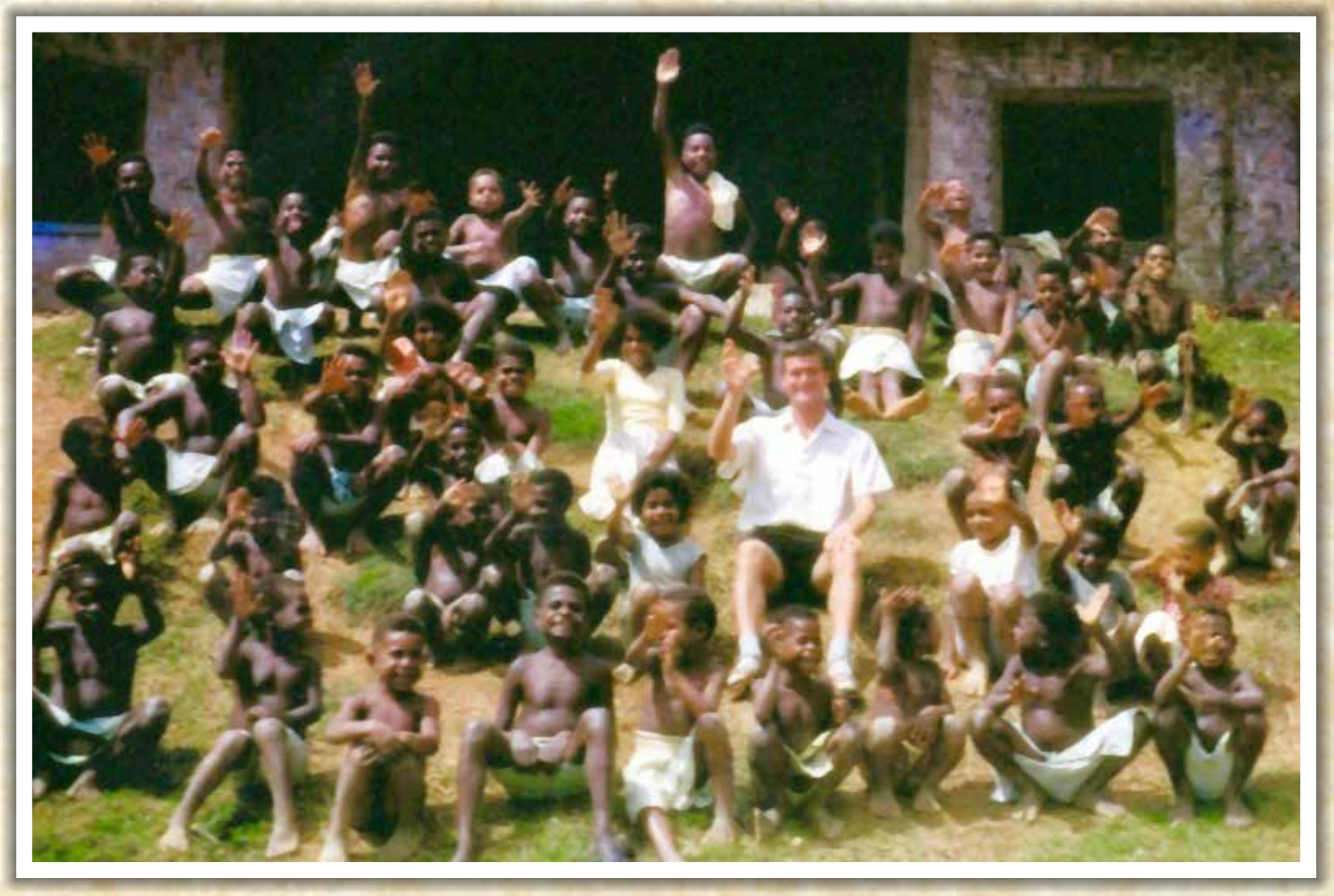


Jimi Primary T School with happy students

FROM TOP: During the E Course at Malaguna; Tolai children at a Raburua practice teaching school; Kompiam Primary School nestling on the edge of the spur above the Sau River; the E course single-person donga—luxury accommodation at the time; a new garden for peanuts was planted and a good harvest resulted.

Like so many expatriates, I was attracted to Papua New Guinea long before I arrived there. My interest began in England as a high school student in the late 1940s through a world map, which showed the mainland as partly unexplored; this stimulated in me a desire to visit. Later, that fascination was expanded with a desire not only to go there but to stay and work. In 1960, when I embarked on an around-the-world experience, the Arctic Circle and New Guinea were on the top of my list. It took until 1962 on my travels via Canada and Australia to get there.

I GOT TO NEW GUINEA by being accepted on the 3rd E Course in Rabaul. As for all who were recruited, it was in an idyllic setting. The six-month course itself was most interesting. It combined the basic requirements of a NSW Teacher's Certificate with the practicalities of teaching in rural areas of the country, and with an emphasis on teaching English as a second language (TESL). Even more interesting was the mix of lecturers, some with little or no experience of the country and others—the Territorians—who had lived and worked with the people in a range of settings for many years. What I remembered and found useful I got from the Territorians, in particular from Bert Jones, the principal of the college. The most memorable piece of advice was 'When you are out alone in a bush school, don't drink or go with local women and work seven days a week.' That advice was to be most helpful in my first years.

Particularly enjoyable were the practice teaching activities at village schools around Rabaul, where we found the children to be enthusiastic and keen to learn.

Kompiam 1962–63

At the conclusion of the E Course, I got my wish for a posting to the Western Highlands District, where there was still potentially unexplored territory, or at least areas that had had little or no contact with expatriates. On arrival in the weekly single-engine Otter flight, I was greeted by kiap, Bill Biscoe, his wife Roseanne, medical assistant Geoff Bentley and his wife, Eve. So initially I was not alone and for a few short months I very much enjoyed their company and their initiation of me into life on an outstation, and most importantly the way of life of the local Enga people.

I was, of course, very keen to settle in to my nice new E Course donga, a little embarrassingly standing out against the local materials' classrooms and local teacher's house.

The school had been run by Misikarem, a Tolai teacher who had done a terrific job. For two years he had been alone, away from his fellow islands' people in a possible alien culture, where he could be the subject of a payback if a highlander had been assaulted on the coast. He had very few resources in the school, but managed to run it as a one-teacher school, with half the students as boarders so with the added responsibility of their wellbeing. In a way, I was a reward for his efforts and I didn't want to let him down.

We tried to move fast. I managed, through District Inspector Tas Hammersley, to get some unassembled desks flown in, and a fellow teacher at Wabag cut one of his blackboards in half so I could have one to start a new preparatory class.

Through Geoff Bentley, the opportunity to raise some money arose, since we had no cash and all purchases of food for boarders was done with salt—the currency of exchange along with tobacco. It came in the form of growing peanuts to sell to the Wabag hospital to use as a supplement for sick pregnant women for which there was some cash available.

For the peanut project, every student in the school was involved, which wasn't hard since lessons were only from 8 am to 12.30 pm, and after lunch it was gardening and cleaning around the school until 3 pm. After that, students who might live an hour or more's walk away would have time to walk home, while boarders could engage in some more gardening for extra food if they wished.

Boarders were an interesting challenge. On the one hand, we had to have gardens for them to grow food that was supplemented by a salt ration, so we could purchase *kau kau* (sweet potatoes) from local people. Additionally, from the government, they received one tin of meat or fish per student per week. On the other hand, part of my brief was to get more students into the school from the outlying areas of the sub-district. These would be some hours, even days, walk away. Some present boarders were from these areas, having been gathered by a kiap on patrol previously. He had brought in a few boys with one or two destined for enrolment at the school, and the others for training on the patrol post for such jobs as interpreters. I collected some new ones on a couple of patrols with the kiap, but I then had an additional job at term holidays to walk some home and then collect them for the next term. The reason for that was the danger of them being killed while going through traditional enemy territory, but they would be left alone if with a European. So that was sometimes my term holiday!

Kompiam School—equipped with one old blackboard and some very rudimentary desks

FROM TOP: Meeting a student's family; purchasing food for the patrol carriers, police and teachers; clansmen gather to hear the merits of letting some boys attend the station and school; the live pig is collected from the station with loud chanting on the way to the school; at the Kompiam New Year's Day Sing-Sing, 1963.

It was in these exciting early months that the need for a meaningful goal became more pressing. I had come to PNG as a missionary, not a religious one, but one with a strong belief in Western education and ways of life. I believed the most worthwhile content should be the 3Rs in English and learning about the capitalist way of economic life. I had fuzzy ideas about democracy, self-reliance and personal ambition. I believed we should strive towards valuing the individual as much if not more than the group. I was strong in my belief and about valuing both genders equally, about being not physically aggressive and valuing reason over physical might.

As noted earlier, I recognised the need to combine the traditional way of life in making schoolwork only in the morning, and outdoor work including gardening for self-reliance. We also took on cultural studies such as weaving, building, weapons making, dance and storytelling.

However, my Western approach did not always work as expected. An early example was when local clan groups were supposed to come and clean around the school, mainly cutting grass, once a week. It started well but they got very slack. I tried to reason and got nowhere. One day, as they sat under a tree when they should have been working, I went towards them with a big stick pretending I would hit someone if they did not get to work. I accidentally hit an old man too weak to get up and away, to great laughter from the rest of the group. I was mortified but quickly warned by my local servant not to help the poor old man. From that point on, I gained a reputation as a good but hard man who could not be physically challenged—a reputation I did not want.

Making spears and bows and arrows added excitement to the potential riot I had to break up when I introduced the idea of games in the form of korfball—a mixed non-contact ball-handling sport a little like netball, as being competition without direct physical aggression.

Cultural activities became a particularly successful part of school learning, when at the end of the school year the students arranged to have a *sing-sing*. A pig was presented by the kiap so they could have a *mumu* and follow with singing and dancing.

At a broader community level, a huge *sing-sing* was arranged at Kompiam for clans from around the district at New Year. It was a great success with no disputes or fighting.

With the new year, my interests and involvement were forced to expand. Within weeks, both the kiap and the medical assistant were posted to other centres and I, as was the custom with the government at the time when there was only one expatriate there, was left in charge of everything. I was not only the teacher in charge of the school, but also in charge of the station and hospital. I had become *masta bilong al*. This was all in theory if not in practice, for I had to keep in daily contact with the powers that be in Wabag. But, as was the practice, since there were no problems, I was left alone for some months.

Naturally, I ran the Kompiam part of the sub-district from my classroom, utilising the excellent Enga communication system—there

were regular news messages sent from hill to hill by voice, and I could get immediate interpretation from the boys in my class. For anything else, a daily visit to the station office and hospital sufficed. Naturally, the school benefited from the extra help around the school provided by the *kalabus* (prisoners).

However, in effect the person who ran the station and kept everyone on track was Sergeant Wengi. He was a quiet, reserved giant of a man in the sense of the respect he had from everyone. He 'saved my bacon' on many occasions, and I am sure he did the same for many other expatriates, including the kiaps under whom he served his country. I had two of his children in my class; they were bright little buttons, strong in character like their father and their mother.

One of my most privileged memories was of my departure from Kompiam on being posted to Jimi River. The Otter aircraft was there to take me and my gear to Tabibuga. Everyone was there to say goodbye and Wengi, who always quietly stood in the background, came forward. He shook my hand and thanked me for my time there and wished me well for the Jimi, in Pidgin of course. I had never seen him make such a gesture.

Jimi River 1963–64

In a way, Jimi River Primary T School was the next school down the road except there were no roads and few people. It was about twenty minutes flying time in the old Otter down the Sau River to the Yuat, and then up the Jimi River Valley with the Hagen-Sepik divide on one side. Like Kompiam, the airstrip was central to government activity. Dug out of the mountainside 100 metres or so above the airstrip was first the school, and then another 100 metres or so up to the station.

I had been sent there to sort out some staffing problems, get the school back on an even keel, and renew the support of the local community. As with Kompiam, I was left in charge of the station most of the time when the kiap was on patrol. This made it quite easy to get the support of Corporal Poti, the indigenous policeman in real charge, to summon up the resources I needed to improve the facilities in the school, and even have a new classroom built. Of course, it helped when you had the children of these influential people in the school and Corporal Poti had four.

The Jimi River Station Office at Tabibuga looking down the valley with the Hagen-Sepik Divide

FROM TOP: Jimi girls visiting the school; Jimi School cultural day; Jimi Primary T School with happy students; It was a whole school project to prepare the seedbeds, ensuring they were correctly dug and build fences to protect the site from pigs.

It took some time to establish a good working routine with both students and the two teachers, after a difficult period of instability. In the classrooms, teaching was improved with the introduction of the new Minenda Series for teaching English, and girls came more to the fore as prejudice against them was squashed. I managed to get a few more girls into the school with the help of Corporal Poti, who suddenly seemed to realise that his two adolescent daughters in my class were quite bright and, with an education, could have a broader range of options for the future.

Being on my own as the only expatriate for weeks on end began to take its toll on my personal life. It was a problem early in my time with visits from the local young women to see what the new teacher was doing in the school. Like other local people they would look in through the open classroom window frames, all bare from the waist up. That was not all. I also got stones thrown at my metal donga at night and calls of *'masta mi stop'*. Buckets of water and sticks thrown out didn't seem to stop this. Of course, I was working seven days a week and not drinking any alcohol, and trying to stick to the advice I'd been given during training. Eventually, I complained to the local *luluai* that I wanted this to stop, telling him I was married. He said that my wife's absence was all the more reason for the women to stay. I needed to be consoled for being away from my wife! However, they did stop.

My little donga was the only permanent building on the station at this time, so any expatriate visitors stayed with me. These included the three missionaries in the valley area representing the Lutheran, Catholic and Anglican missions. Each had their own territory and, on their visits, they were keen to know what the others were doing since there was little or no contact among them. I did have one group of visitors I wish I had not had—two so-called scientists from a German museum. They secretly went out and shot birds of paradise then flew out with them, leaving me to meet the rage of the local people. (You can read more about this in 'Tabibuga—My Experience: Roy Kirkby' in *Una Voce*, June 2011, page 21.)

Again, I tried to encourage local culture in the children with craft, dance and storytelling as regulars in the curriculum. An end of term cultural extravaganza, as at Kompiam, went off well except when a re-enactment of a compensation event by two local clan groups was about to get out of hand. I, and possibly others, were saved by my local servant who recognised from the language that they were going to have a real fight.

Meanwhile, progress continued to be made in all areas of school life, with the involvement of the local clans and the station police and families. Unfortunately, though, that unwanted Kompiam reputation as being a hard man if anyone upset me had somehow got through on the grapevine to the Jimi so here I was never sure if reason or reputation was the winner in some circumstances.

Running the station was useful because you were forced out of your education cocoon and into recognising the worth of education in the wider community.

It was not always a picnic.

It made me question the value of Western education and our directions. An example was the Hagen axe incident. These ceremonial axes were made in the middle Jimi Valley and were becoming a prized tourist purchase. To maintain supply of good quality axes, the government had arranged with the clans of the makers to purchase all the axes and take the following action. Axes were brought to the station every month or so. The kiap was to inspect these, reject by breaking up any of inferior quality and purchase the good ones. These were then flown to Mount Hagen and sold at cost to local tourism operators. With the kiap away, I had to be the kiap and do the purchase and reluctantly break up on the spot poor quality axes.

I felt sorry for the makers of the ones I broke up who had walked for one, sometimes two, days to the station. But that was what the people wanted. It was also pointed out to me that it was what was expected to maintain my reputation.

But, yet again, after a visit from the district inspector to say we were doing a good job in reconciling the Education Department in the community, I was required to up sticks and move to another politically-sensitive school situation, and take up the reins at Keltiga in the Wahgi Valley.

Keltiga Primary T School 1964

Keltiga was just a few kilometres from Mount Hagen on the road to the Southern Highlands. It had thirty years of expatriate contact and the school bordered on the property of my neighbour, Danny Leahy, the first expatriate explorer and expatriate resident in the valley.

Local clans were very influential in demanding support, and this had resulted in getting new permanent school buildings, and asking for a new expatriate teacher in charge. One of my first actions was to befriend the most influential clan leader, Pena, who had several children in the school. Between us, we managed to get additional funding and support from other local clans by establishing some competition between them,

Seeds were planted to a strict depth and spacing;

FROM TOP: Kolda's class at Keltiga Pilot School; Agricultural officers came along to learn how to develop seed nurseries; On our wedding day; The happy couple.

each believing that they got the same or a better deal than the other clans. An example of this was taking on a new class of children with a strict ratio of boys to girls from each clan.

The real breakthrough for Keltiga came when we became a pilot school for a New Mathematics project. This was an international project to change the format and content focus of teaching mathematics, sold to the Education Department as a quicker means of developing mathematical literacy in primary school and beyond. Working enthusiastically with me was Kolda, the first local graduate teacher. Kolda took on the new class of forty-eight children, with an expectation that we would lose half.

Kolda demanded perfect behaviour from the children always and they listened and learnt and did whatever was asked, in a relaxed not fearful way. We soon had a situation where visitors from around the country and from overseas would come and marvel at what these children were doing, all forty-eight of them since we didn't lose any!

While the project brought some kudos to the school, it wasn't really helping the local community in a way that they could easily see. We needed something of economic benefit, which Highlanders were quick to recognise and embrace. That project was the establishment of the first Highlands tea nursery.

While a tea nursery had been established at Garaina near Bulolo, nothing had been done elsewhere and I could get very little information from the Department of Agriculture. So, I got the information myself from overseas, established what needed to be done and then got seed from Garaina. It became a whole school project and ended up with Keltiga students educating agricultural officers on how to establish nurseries!

The tea project continued and the school and its community became a source of young tea bushes for local and international companies developing tea plantations in the Highlands.

However, I was not there to see it to fruition because I was moved again, and this time to Mount Hagen Primary T School as deputy headmaster. There were two reasons for this and the first was because I had got married. I was extremely lucky to win a South Australian teacher posted to Mount Hagen— and Nonie Hay became Nonie Kirkby.

What is more, we were married by God himself—District Commissioner Tom Ellis! Those who served under him felt he deserved the nickname.

Our honeymoon was to fly in to Tabibuga in the Jimi and walk out, taking two days over the Hagen Sepik Divide to Banz. We did it, but on reflection it was a bit of a hair brain idea. It was pleasant walking through the bush to suddenly come upon about 100 metres of a beautiful road with neatly arranged colourful bushes on either side, then again take up a track through the bush—the result of one clan building its section of the proposed Banz to Jimi Road. Less pleasantly memorable was overnight in a hut at 8,000 feet in freezing weather, sharing one sleeping bag.

Mount Hagen Primary T School 1965–67

The second reason for the move was the desire of District Education Officer, Tas Hammersley, to set up a New Maths Project in a larger centre for the training of teachers. Both Nonie and I were to be involved in this, through teaching together at the school and developing resources. We did this over a couple of years and conducted workshops in other centres including the Southern Highlands, East Sepik and Madang.

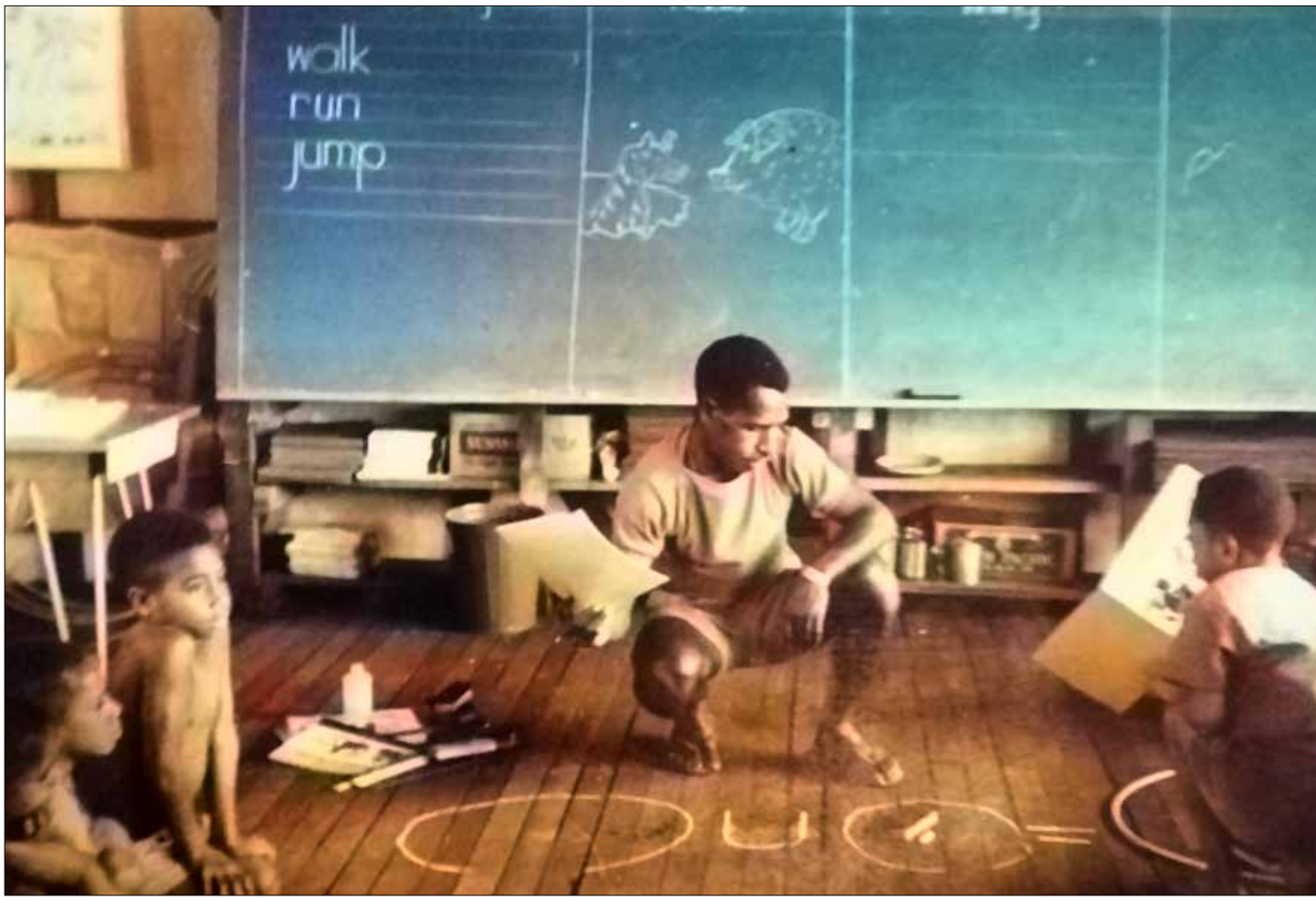
The headmaster at Hagen PTS was Dick Ellison, a practical down-to-earth no-nonsense Western Australian teacher. He was naturally dubious of the New Maths and enthusiastic young teachers like me. But he was willing to give it all a go. Dick told us that we could do anything we liked in maths, but at the end of the term he would give the class a test in the regular arithmetic they were expected to know in our classes, according to the present curriculum.

He followed it up and the children passed with flying colours. It was a reality check, but one I have always remembered in the many projects I have been involved in over the rest of my career. The children's present learning needs came first and had to be addressed in whatever you did.

Thanks Dick.

At the school, we were given a new double classroom for our maths activities, and as a place to conduct demonstrations and run workshops for teachers. Nonie and I worked hard to get our respective classes up to a demonstration standard, before inviting teachers in to observe and interact with the children.

Success was limited since many teachers, both indigenous and expatriate, found some of the concepts and expectations too challenging. Some of the bright students would often trick observing teachers by claiming a wrong answer to be the correct one. We tried to assist teachers by producing



Kolda teaching New Maths at Keltiga;

FROM TOP: Children worked independently in small groups on maths activities; Nonie with her prep class; Student dancers at a college cultural festival; A student on practice teaching.

teachers' support books such as *A Hundred Number Games for Primary Classes*. However, momentum was developing and the Education Department, along with commercial educational interests, wanted a new national curriculum.

Coming out of this was TEMLAB, a mathematics package destined to be distributed to all schools. Both Nonie and I were involved in this, resulting in a posting for me to the new UNESCO-supported Goroka Teachers' College as a lecturer in mathematics education, and Nonie to the North Goroka Demonstration School as a teacher. Prior to that we had a couple of great years teaching at Mt Hagen PTS, not just the new maths but also developing new resources in teaching English and helping indigenous teachers.

Goroka Teachers' College 1967–70

The brand new GTC was to be the first college to train both primary and secondary teachers and to assist in that were appointed UNESCO lecturers as advisers for each department. They arrived with experience in many countries around the world and we PNG-experienced lecturers looked with awe at the prospect of working under them, keen to learn what we could from these world-class experts.

While they were nice people, they tended to have knowledge that was way out of date. Their attention seemed to be on other things, like continuing their research into the parasites of certain beetles, or spending their allocated UNESCO funds on the likes of building a telescope centre on the roof of the college for the study of the stars, when we only had a handful of clear night skies each year. The result was that we Territorian lecturers largely developed our own courses to fit the needs of our students when they went out to teach.

However, we tried to encourage the open mindedness of a tertiary institution, which included encouraging political awareness. This resulted in one of the first political parties being formed at the college. Students generally were keen to encourage the government to start considering a quicker timetable towards independence. Initially, they became very active in symbolic activities such as getting a name for the country and the design for a national flag.

We did not forget the need to connect college life with traditional culture, and the college became a rich centre of art, drama and traditional music and dance.

But there was more to successful student development than just the teaching staff. The partners of most staff were also engaged in teaching themselves, or they were engaged in creating families, and in involving students in a range of family and personal development activities.

Some engaged in other activities as volunteers making an important contribution to community life.

Nonie set up a Brownie troop that broadened the skills of girls in a changing society. My main activity was the sport of korfball.

(This is a separate story described in Part One.) This sport also had an educational purpose in that it was a mixed gender sport and enabled boys and girls to play together in a spirit of equality. It worked very well at GTC and students took it on their own initiative to all areas of the country when they graduated.

Madang 1972–75

1971 saw us moving to Brisbane for a year to study at Queensland University. Our return was to Madang where I was to take up a post at Madang Teachers' College, becoming Senior Lecturer in Social Sciences while Nonie took a position at Jomba Dual Curriculum School.

At the college, my past began to catch up with me in a very pleasant way, as four of my ex-students from Keltiga and Mount Hagen schools were now at the college as student teachers. Others, who had been student teachers at Goroka, were at local Madang schools as teachers. All this enhanced our family life, to be living in such a pleasant place, where the college rented an island at Nagada, which we visited with friends at weekends and at other times with student groups.

It was an exciting time to be in the country as the move towards self-government and independence accelerated. Indigenous lecturers started taking up positions in our colleges, and there was an expectation to help develop any aspect of life that could contribute towards meeting the demands of independence. I was involved, for example, in setting up political education programs that could be used in the local community and administered by teachers.

Sometimes, with the push for quick changes, there was insufficient time to do a good job. One example that stood out for me was being asked to go to education headquarters in Konedobu, where I sat in an office with a typewriter to write a whole new social science curriculum for primary schools in just two days! Luckily, it was not accepted in its entirety because it was criticised and modified by some indigenous officers on their way up to top jobs in the Education Department.

The quadrangle at the Goroka Teachers' College

As lecturers, we engaged in a range of initiatives to help prepare the way for indigenous teachers and lecturers when we departed. Two such programs aimed to support the teaching of social studies and to facilitate the recording of traditional cultural art and crafts.

Self-government came and in as many ways as possible we looked to make it a reality. In the sport of korfball, now expanding throughout the country, we attempted to make it as self-governing as possible and all administrative positions were in indigenous hands. Furthermore, we attempted from the beginning to have a community awareness expectation. We expected players to contribute to the community in raising funds for community causes, or doing community work such as building a shade house.

Looming independence led Nonie and me to consider our family's future. As much as we loved Papua New Guinea, it wasn't our home for life and it didn't present a future for our family. The idealistic missionary fervour that I had for Western education when I arrived had been well tempered and modified over these years. The many expatriate colleagues and students I knew would continue to evolve an education appropriate for an independent nation with such rich cultures as their foundation.

The opportunities to do further study in England, career prospects in Australia and family connections led to us leaving the country just prior to independence.

At different times, we both returned for short visits to make small contributions, and to remind us of this richly developmental part of our lives.

FROM TOP: Mothers, their children and keen student baby-sitters; Nonie Kirkby as Brown Owl and her Goroka Troop; The college island at Nagada, a haven for staff and student recreation.

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