

Fruit that will last

In John's gospel Jesus says to his disciples; "I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends." Early in April six students and two staff members saw the liberation that comes with moving from the status of servant to that of friend. They met girls in Uganda, rescued by the United Nations from lives of servitude in the sex trade, provided with education and security and restored to the dignity of a life they own; free to dance, to learn and to be called friends.

You don't come back from Africa unchanged. It was risky business on many levels to send Billanook College students Alex, Shannon, Courtney P, Courtney W, Elise and Georgia accompanied by Staff member Robyn Green and Principal Roger Oates to Kenya for a Round Square conference and then on to Uganda.

Billanook College, a K -12 Uniting Church School in Mooroolbark is a member of Round Square, an international group of schools committed to the IDEALS of International understanding, Democracy, Environmental sustainability, Adventure, Leadership and Service to others. Annual national and international conferences and exchanges provide students with the opportunity to hear world-class speakers, engage in global debate, experience adventure host-country style and make a significant contribution to local service projects, inspiring them to be leaders of change in their own communities. The conference in Kenya was all that and more. Students and staff returned with stories of providing a meal for children in the Kibera slum, building a library in another part of Nairobi and seeing first-hand the realities of a life so different from their own. Following the conference the final stage of the experience was a two-day visit to Uganda.

St Margaret's Uniting Church in Mooroolbark has supported the work of the Rubaga Youth Development Association in many ways including fundraising since 1996. A vocational skills training centre, RYDA works with vulnerable and homeless children and families at risk in Uganda, teaching occupational and life skills and crafting a future built on restored health and hope. As a previous minister at St Margaret's and now chaplain at Billanook the opportunity was obvious to make a real-life connection with RYDA, offering not only resources but relationship between their students and ours, and, in the process, strengthening our partnership with the local congregation.

The Billanook delegation was the first school group to visit RYDA. Hosted at the director's house they were welcomed with the embrace of family, such is the close connection between St Margaret's and RYDA. Dancing, singing, computer classes, hair-braiding and visits to local markets for supplies more than filled the time available. Ugandan TV came with cameraman and reporter on a motorbike to do a story on the visit; the goat was slaughtered and eaten.

Reflecting on the experience, a month or so after being back home there's a sense that the students carry the weight of their exposure with less ease than they might have anticipated. They have seen first hand the unbridled happiness of people who own little more than what they stand up in, and that brings into question the truth and degree of happiness in their own relatively well-resourced lives and the lives of those around them. They carry knowledge of the depth of poverty, the degree of hunger, the ever-present threat of disease and death and have lost the ability to take their health and lifestyle for granted.

The closing part of that passage from John's gospel talks about bearing fruit, fruit that will last. It's too early to tell what fruit may blossom and flourish as a result of this remarkable visit, but the commandment to love one another has, for six students and two staff members taken on a new face. You don't come back from Africa unchanged; you come back understanding that whatever else we have in life, our connection to each other, our capacity to love one another across all boundaries and borders, is the greatest gift and treasure.