20 Years Supporting Street Youth in Uganda

In the early morning hours of 27 April 1996, a weary Australian educator and a disheartened social worker from Africa met at the breakfast bar of a café on West Broadway, San Diego. Their meeting was not chosen by either of them: it was random, unexpected and unscripted. When the educator entered the café, the stool beside the African was the only vacant place in the room.

PHOTO: SUPPLIED

In April, several members of St Margaret's gathered to reflect on their 20-year association with RYDA

Geoffrey asked the Australian to pass the salt; Douglas broke his resolve to keep to himself, eat quickly and get out of there. They struck up a conversation that would profoundly impact both their lives.

I was that travel-worn Australian, and twenty years later, the consequences of our short conversation continue to be integral to both the spiritual life and outreach of St Margaret's Uniting Church and the African success story that is Rubaga Youth Development Association (RYDA).

I remember Reverend Lesley Shekleton encouraging the original support idea to be presented to the congregation. Since then I have been endlessly stunned at the growth of RYDA's support community beyond St. Margaret's and by RYDA's initiative and enterprise in extracting $1.10 value from every dollar given. The church-managed website for RYDA (blackdouglas.com.au/ryda) shows just how well the money has been utilised.

RYDA's principal aim has been to empower the poor and disadvantaged of Uganda, especially women and children, by assisting them to increase their socio-economic independence. In particular, RYDA seeks to increase life skills, opportunity, education and vocational training to help put an end to child labour.

For 20 years, the congregation's constancy has fanned the embers of RYDA's hope. In April—the 20th anniversary of that chance meeting—several members of St Margaret's reflected on what this commitment has meant to them.

Stephen White revealed that hearing Geoffrey speak was his reason for becoming a St Margaret's member. "In the 90s, Karen and I were looking for a church. Karen gave St Margaret's a try and convinced me that this could be the one for us, so I came along. It happened to be a morning RYDA's founder, Geoffrey Kyeyune, was visiting from Kampala. I was so impressed with his story and the congregation's support for RYDA's work that I have been here ever since."

Marj Hookey, treasurer for most of this period, observed, "St Margaret's involvement with RYDA has shown us what real mission giving is all about. It is a bold and breathtaking story of a visionary leader changing the lives of orphaned and vulnerable street youth in Uganda."

For Joyce Dodge, whose family were early settlers of Mooroolbark, the good thing about supporting RYDA is the continuity. "It is an organisation where God is at work." Yvonne Spicer expanded this thread, commenting, "It never ceases to amaze me how the Holy Spirit has worked, and continues to work, through us and RYDA—how everything falls into place." Reverend Arnie Wierenga, who has run multiple marathons to raise funds for RYDA, agreed with Yvonne. "I am constantly amazed at how much can be achieved with almost nothing and a little faith."

Geoffrey read the anniversary article in the April web news and sent a simple email in response: "The website has reminded me that we are 20 years older. At the time I was 33 years, now am 53 years. God has guided us well that we have saved lives."

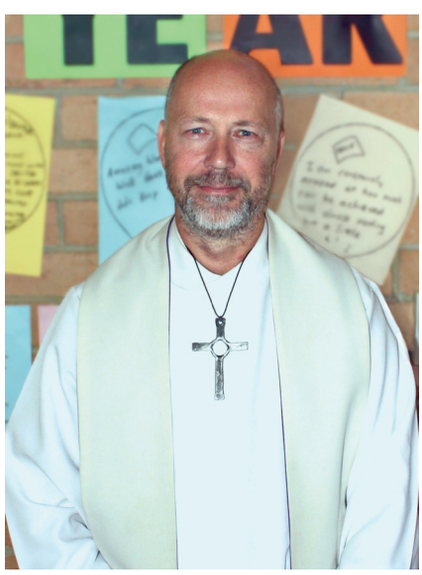

PHOTO: SUPPLIED

Reverend Arnie Wierenga has run several marathons in support of RYDA

Douglas Williams

FREE FAMILY FILM NIGHT

Based on the 2007 Roald Dahl-inspired book *Doctor Proctor*. Bored tween Lisa suddenly finds her hometown is filled with much more excitement than she thought when newbie Nilly introduces her to Doctor Proctor. He's trying to create a powder that prevents hair loss, but his latest effort has instead resulted in an odourless fart powder. He soon discovers another side effect, if it is taken in large quantities—propulsion. While this could mean millions if he can sell it to NASA, he hasn't counted on jealous rival Mr Thrane who has designs on stealing the powder and the glory.

85 minutes – Rated PG

All Welcome

Mooroolbark Community Centre

29 June 2016

Film commences at 7:30 pm

Free ice-cream, tea & coffee available

This is a joint community service extended to families by Mooroolbark Christian Fellowship & Mooroolbark Community Centre

To reserve your tickets* phone 1300 368 333 or book online at www.culturetracks.info

Bookings commence from 17 June 2016

* If you have not made a booking, please come anyway, as uncollected tickets may be reissued at 7:15 pm — there are always seats available.