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MEDIA RELEASE

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A team of Rotarians fly to Timor Leste in early October to mark the 15th anniversary of RYLA which is training the next generation of leaders.

Rotary is helping young people in Timor Leste become the country's future leaders. Since 2005, Rotary has developed young leaders through their Rotary Youth Leadership Award (RYLA) program and these young people are involved in diverse areas of community service.

At the time of the UN sanctioned elections in 2002, the average age of the population was 18 after 20 to 30 percent of the population perished or disappeared.

This left a vast gap in capacity for the remaining population and many stepped in to help. Rotary recognised that youth leadership was critical for the future of Timor Leste and RYLA, with a track record of benefits in Australia, connected with our neighbour.

The success of the RYLA program was followed by the introduction of the Rotary Youth Program of Enrichment (RYPEN) for school leavers.

These programs both meet a deep community need and have become sustainable as RYLA graduates run the next programs.

RYLA is a week-long, intensive leadership program for young adults, described by many graduates as "life changing".

In 2005 Rotary brought young men and women, selected by Kirsty Gusmao, the wife of then President Xanana Gusmao, to Sydney for RYLA.

In 2008 Theo Glockemann AO, from the Rotary Club of Pennant Hills and his wife Georgia flew to Timor Leste to visit students who had billeted with them in Sydney.

Realising that flying them to Sydney was not cost-effective, and that the need for young leaders was great, in 2008 they returned to Timor Leste with a group of like-minded Rotarians to investigate setting up a RYLA program in Dili. It was a unanimous decision to proceed.

In 2010 the first RYLA with 50 participants was held in Liquica, about 30km west of Dili. In 2012 a fully-fledged RYLA for 100 participants was held in Dili.

"It did not run perfectly but the enthusiasm of the participants encouraged the leaders to persevere" Theo said.

"It was obvious that funding was needed and Woodside Energy, who was involved with the development of the Sunrise gas fields, came on board. They have since donated more than \$1 million to the Timor Leste RYLA program."

Each week-long residential camp is for 100 18-28 year olds, with equal numbers of males and females and equal numbers of urban and rural youth.

More than 1400 have graduated from the courses which now sees 1000 applicants each year.

An elected and trained facilitator group of 15 RYLA graduates plan, produce and manage the course.

“It is regarded as the premier youth leadership activity in the country,” said Theo. “National leaders volunteer their time as guest speakers and the course receives much media interest.”

Each year Sydney Rotarians visit with a team who have an interest in Timor’s future. While each RYLA proved very successful, they discovered there was a much larger problem with the challenges facing school leavers who would not continue to higher education.

“There is a scarcity of jobs and skills training, so what was to become of them?” Theo said. “Bleak futures working in the fields or jobs at \$1 a day.”

In 2013, another Rotary program, RYPEN (Rotary Youth Project of Enrichment) was adapted and renamed “Encouragement” to address the needs of this young group of Timorese. This program fosters increased self-esteem, better school attendance, improved attitude and goal setting, participation in community activities, better family relations, less sexual assault and other positive outcomes.

In Australia RYPEN fosters mid-teen students, while participants of the three-day camps in Timor Leste are school leavers whose vocational future is unclear.

Since 2013, 16 camps have been held in varying districts of Timor Leste.

Facilitators conduct an expo for teachers in surrounding schools to explain the program, then they are asked to nominate candidates from their school for interview.

“This is cost effective. A full camp for 60 participants is \$US 4500 - 5000.

“The camps are funded by Sydney Rotary clubs and, in the past with Rotary grants.

“We are wanting to increase the numbers but need extra funding and corporate support to do this.”

Angelo Raviane from the Rotary Club of Crows Nest is managing the RYLA programs while Theo is monitoring RYPEN.

TH programs have also partnered with Macquarie University’s Diplomacy training courses in the past, bringing students from different countries together for a week’s intensive training. Once the courses are completed, that isn’t the end. The RYPEN and RYLA programs link them with job prospects.

“Timorese university graduates cannot find a job without work experience,” said Theo.

Each year more than 20 selected RYLA alumni spend six months in an internship program completing intensive job training in their appropriate field with one of the many NGOs in Timor sponsored by Woodside.

(many sponsored by Woodside)

Interns are paid a stipend during their training time and it has been shown over two years that more than 70% are immediately employed by the NGO and the balance quickly find appropriate jobs elsewhere.

The program has also seen Rotary develop in Timor Leste; a Rotary Club was formed from mainly RYLA alumni, seven new Rotaract Clubs have started (in Dili, Aileu, Ermera, Bobonaro, Manatuto, Manufahi and Covalima). That’s 1000 Rotaractors, sourced principally from RYLA and RYPEN projects and they are increasing by 10 members per month.

They have undertaken many community service projects; each month 60+ blood donations are given at Dili Hospital, tutoring children in English, a chicken farm established raising up to \$600+ per month, provided environmental support in the far east, supplying water for animals, managed youth projects on behalf of the Government and supplied necessary provisions and medical assistance to outlying villages during Timor floods.

A few years ago Theo and Angelo, with some of the RYLA team, met with President Jose Ramos Horta – the meeting was scheduled for 10 minutes but blew out to 90 minutes. The Timorese Government is very accepting of the Youth Leadership projects.

Like many Rotary projects, the takeaway from those involved have also been marked. “Their enthusiasm, patriotism, eagerness to learn, their lasting friendship and their caring for those less fortunate are qualities that we will never forget,” Theo said.

“We are so immensely proud to have been a very small part of the progress they have continually supported.

“What has been achieved during our fifteen year involvement would have been impossible without the generosity and help from so many – Woodside Energy and its co-venture partners Timor Gap and Osaka Gas, Rotary Australia World Community Service and supporters in Australia.

The close connection between Rotarians and Timor Leste saw other programs introduced; Days for Girls ensures girls do not miss days of education during their menstrual cycle. The DfG kits are now made and distributed by Timorese in Timor, reproductive health seminars have been conducted by female team members, and other seminars on topics including wealth creation, management, employment applications, etc

The development and continuation of these programs in Timor Leste saw Theo Glockemann awarded Rotary’s highest honour, the Service Above Self Award, this year

Side story

In 2013 a team of a dozen young students from Barker College, an independent school in Sydney’s north, joined the Rotary team and participated in the Timor RYPEN camp. Barker teacher Matthew Lloyd advocated for the initiative and accompanied the group. He was inspirational to everyone concerned. His involvement in the two following years was hugely welcomed.

“The bonding of the students from opposite sides of the economic spectrum was very special for all concerned,” Theo said.

There are plans for such trips to continue, after a break during the COVID years.

Background

After 400 years of colonization, Timor gained independence from Portugal in 1975.

That year Indonesia invaded and ruled for 24 years.

During this time 20% to 30% of the population, 250,000 to 300,000 people perished or ‘disappeared’.

The country was in turmoil and UN Peace Keeping Forces entered for three years until UN sanctioned parliamentary elections were held in 2002.

At that time the average age of the population was 18.