

ONF

Ono Niha Foundation

Newsletter – April 2016



Jill visited the ONF base in Nias from 16th March-2nd April. Here is her story.

The three aims of my trip were to see how the scholarships program was going, to help with the disabled children's program, and to get the dental program running again after Iwan's serious accident.

This was my first trip without my husband Peter – the bearer of the passports, tickets and cash. I had to overcome anxiety and health issues before leaving, and I conquered both! (In fact she smashed it Peter.) Nias is like my second home and family and they looked after me very well.

Scholarships program

About 20 students from poor families are supported by sponsors in Australia. Jeli is the local field worker who distributes the support every month and keeps in touch with the students. I visited each family on the back of Mimi's motorbike with Jeli following. We visited all of the students and several other very poor families who desperately need support.

This was the first time I have visited all of the families, meeting them in their homes and talked with them and their children. My previous six visits to Nias and surrounds had focussed on peering into patient's mouths and doing fillings and extractions, or helping the disabled kids at our centre. This was the first time I spent a lot of time in the community. I was deeply moved by the poverty. I have been researching world poverty since coming home and it seems that Nias is within the highest poverty bracket. Some of the families have inherited family homes (the village tradition, and which can give the impression they are relatively well off), others rent, and others had houses built for them after the tsunami and earthquake in 2014/15. However, all of



Mimi and Jill visiting one of the poor villagers



Inside one of the homes

them have very little cash flow and are poor. Most of the students have lost one or both parents. Some live with their widowed mum, some with dad because the mum had run away, some with siblings, and others with grandparents who are too old to work. All of the families harvest pig food (sweet potato leaves) and get \$2-3 per day, and in some cases half of this is given to the farmer where the pig food is grown. Others collect rubber and receive only 40 cents per kg, and they cannot harvest during the frequent rains!

Education is the key to overcoming poverty, and you are helping them!! The \$30 per month our sponsors provide allow the students to attain a basic education, which will make a big difference to their future.

Some of the senior students would benefit from going to a better school in Teluk Dalam (about 30 km away), but this requires "bus" fares of about \$20 which is often out of reach. Many of the students want to go to "University" in Teluk Dalam. This used to be free until the new local government introduced fees last year. One student (not sponsored) had only 6 months to finish her degree but could not because her parents were too poor to pay the \$100 fee. Her father's hips and knees are too far gone for him to work and her mother collects pig food. The daughter was devastated. She is now working on an island off southern Sumatra where there is more work, but we will try to raise the funds so she can complete her degree. Her 2 siblings have been sent to Gunung Sitoli (the largest town on Nias, with more employment) so they can work and go to school. Often they clean, cook and wash clothes in exchange for food and lodging.

What has affected me the most from this trip is the level of poverty and what these families have to survive on. I have come home quite troubled by the poverty and we are now looking into other ways we can help. But in Nias lots of families have no money to purchase even the basic commodities such as a plastic chair. They sleep on boards on a slightly raised platform, often with the whole family sleeping together. Some get inherited furniture. Some set up a little shop or their husbands go to Jakarta to find work. They are often gone for a year at a time but - some never return. Some sell fish if they can afford to buy them first, and others catch their own. Some harvest coconuts by climbing up the trees - dangerous stuff. Some have inherited patches of rubber trees but the rubber price has decreased from 70 cents to 40 cents per kilo over the last year, which is not enough to live on.

Like many Asian countries the poor just exist, so pollution and waste management does not even come into the picture. The once clean rivers are sometimes polluted with pig and occasionally human excrement. The rivers run into Lagundri Bay, once a pristine deep



Jill with one of the children that needs support



A traditional home past down the family, but no cash flow



The family living the the house above. The grandparents look after the children

bay with a beautiful beach and surf break. Going for a dip in the ocean sometimes means swimming amongst “interesting” objects, and uncontrolled sand mining has reduced the beach to a very narrow strip with significant coastal erosion. The bore water (a common source of drinking and kitchen water) is also contaminated, so that leaving a container of this water in a warm place for one day results in a rather “interesting” odour.

There are so many needs in this community and I have only just scraped the surface. I am sure many villages on Nias are similar. What you are doing by enabling a student to go to school is way more than enabling them to read and write - it is giving them an “escape” from the poverty cycle, and for them to help their families to do so as well.

Disabilities program

Amy (a trained speech therapist but with lots of experience with disabled children) visited with us for one week last year, and made such a difference. She returned again with her friend Sally, a specialist in paediatric occupational therapy. They also brought two specialised wheelchairs. I bought one with me as well. These wheelchairs were donated by Wheelchairs for Kids in Perth. Amy and Sally spent many hours adjusting the wheelchairs to fit our three most needy children, and trained Matt (our Foundation chairman) so he can do fitting when more chairs are delivered. The joy on the parents' faces was fantastic to see, with many hugs and tears. What a difference these wheelchairs will make. In the past the disabled children were often confined at home with little stimulation or exercise, but now they can accompany the parents when they harvest rubber or pig food.

We had a range of therapy aids built by a local carpenter following Amy's visit last year. Amy and Sally trained Mimi, the parents and the children how to use them. Sally and Amy think that several of the children will be able to walk with enough exercise and training. Mimi will continue the twice-weekly sessions in the centre for the children and families. Some of the aids were given for use in their homes and more will be built for the other children.

Jill was donated about six pairs of leg braces by Laura in Tasmania. Sally and Amy adjusted these for several of the children, and Jill bought a 2nd hand wetsuit from a local businessman which they cut up and used for splitting. Thank you Laura for your generosity. We would love to have more limb braces to help straighten joints. Any donors out there?

On the last day we (the children and parents) went to a local pool for fun and aqua therapy. The kids had stacks



Harvesting pig food (sweet potato)



Sally training Matt on adjusting a wheelchair



Sally and Amy, with Prita



of fun in the pool, but the parents even more so. Jill jumped in clothes and all. We then bought them all lunch. It was so special seeing a common bond (a desire to do the best for their child) break the cultural barriers between the poor and well off, and to see the parents interact and laugh and cry together.

The one week visit by Amy and Sally again made a big difference – the wheelchairs, braces, exercises, encouragement, mutual support for the kids and parents – really special to see and to be part of. We will bring another four wheelchairs in July-September this year, and we desperately need OTs to come again. Any offers?

Dental program

Iwan had been running dental hygiene clinics until his severe accident in March last year. We packed up the dental equipment after our visit in August/September because he was still recovering in Medan. He returned home in about November last year. Jill set up the dental surgery again and Iwan did two scale and cleans for the 1st time in a year, with the help of painkillers because of his still damaged hip. Iwan was exhausted but so happy to be able to help again. He will conduct dental hygiene clinics about two times per week, which will be free for the poor but with a small fee for those who can afford to pay. This will go towards his wage and expenses. It was very emotional to see Iwan back at work again. Thank you for your prayers and financial support for his recovery.

The future

Peter and I are going back in late July-late September, and Peter's brother (builder) and sister (teacher) will be coming in September. We need occupational therapists and teachers. Come and make a difference!



Sally with Randy and his folks. Sally fitted the donated braces on Randy's feet



Having fun in the pool, and the kids did too!



The farewell lunch – so much fun



Iwan and Mimi in the "dental surgery"



Iwan is back at work! Thank you God that his hands can help again. It has been a long haul.