

A Safe Haven in Australia

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The following story is part 2 of The Wonder of the Power of One- A story by John W. Gehring

“We don’t invent our mission; we detect it. It is within us waiting to be realized.” —Viktor Frankl

Each person is capable of achieving greatness. Embodying a virtuous character has much more to do with personal greatness than wealth, status, and position. The everyday actions of good people may not make the morning news but they do make a crucial difference in the quality of all our lives. People who catch a vision of how things should be and dedicate their heart, time and energy toward fulfilling that vision are a powerful force to reckon with. Micklo Jarett, or Michael as we knew him, was such a person.

In the first year of the new Millennium, I traveled to Australia with a colleague and friend, Fazida Razak with the purpose of running a seminar on service at an international peace conference hosted by the IIFWP (International Interreligious Federation for World Peace). Fazida and I had worked for over a decade with the Religious Youth Service (RYS) on an interfaith service project, and we were focused on using this opportunity as a way to encourage RYS to branch out into Australia and the South Pacific.

Presenting the RYS Case in Australia

In Sydney, at the IIFWP conference, Fazida and I addressed an audience of leaders from a variety of professions that spanned the political and religious spectrum. We sought to convey how the efforts of RYS worldwide helped inspire personal transformation and promoted reconciliation and healing in areas such as Sri Lanka where they were critically needed. The audience responded well to the presentations but it was the spontaneous comments of George Lemon that made the deepest impression. Active and respected for his work in the field of public service and politics, George addressed those present with the sincerity of someone championing a cause.

“As a young man, I decided to take a chance and went to the first RYS project, a program that took place in the Philippines. Those experiences that I gained more than a decade ago forever changed my perspective on life. The project made a powerful impact on each participant. We came from 36 nations and a wide range of religious and cultural backgrounds but, for more than a month, we did our best to offer our services to the simple and beautiful people in our community.”

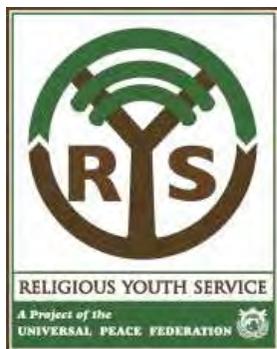
Trained in expressing his ideas with verbal clarity, George gazed upon his audience and forthrightly continued,

“As a young man, I had many concepts about people and many of those concepts were challenged when I worked and lived close together with people from every race and religion. The work in the Philippines RYS opened me to a larger understanding of the daily reality that so many people in the world face. I completely changed my attitude towards the Philippines and its wonderful people. I carried my inspiration into activity and got involved in finding ways to create better relationships between the people of Australia and the Philippines. When more Australians gain this kind of experience, they will be ready to help build a better future for us all.”

George was well aware of the growing cross-cultural changes that Australia was going through. Waves of new immigrants brought with them differing cultural and religious norms and expectations. Each wave of immigrants added new pieces in a mosaic. Helping each of those pieces find their way into the picture of

the New Australia was a timely issue. To George, the RYS provided an experience-based model for how that assistance could be rendered.

The Time is Right for New Ideas



In other words, the RYS model offered experiential insight into how to meet concretely the challenges of a culture in transition. It also offered a practical approach to healing historic wounds inflicted on the Aboriginal community. The idea of creating an active base to support RYS activities in Australia grew out of that meeting.

Immediately following the seminar, two dozen participants joined a planning meeting organized by Mrs. Aila Willets. Aila, a Finnish-born Sydney resident, was eager to help the RYS launch successfully in Australia. Similar to an expectant mother, she made many preparations for the inaugural meeting. The volunteers who joined the meeting formed a circle and began to share freely their hopes and interests in creating RYS service projects in Australia. For many in the circle, this was the first time they would meet Michael Jarrett.

Michael Steps Forward

An animated Michael Jarrett interacted with those in the circle before and during the meeting. Quick to grab hold of the RYS vision, he saw the potential it had for his Aboriginal community of Nambucca Heads. Much more than the ordinary dreamer, Michael owned a clear sense of what was needed to prepare and carry out the program he envisioned. He pleaded the case for RYS to launch in his community. Those present, sensing the urgency of his commitment, agreed. RYS would begin in Nambucca Heads and Michael would be the program's first Australian project director.



photo: www.rnld.org/

With the project site decided and a director appointed, an important issue that needed clarification was deciding the dates of the project. Without hesitation, Michael affirmed that he would put the project together within two months, with just one condition. "My only condition is that Aila Willets is willing to advise me." On hearing the request, Aila quickly smiled at Michael, signaling unspoken agreement.

Fazida and I were struck by Michael's bold and confident declaration but we thought it overly optimistic. A keen observer would be able to read the anxiety in our faces. Experience had taught us that developing a first-of-its-kind project involves trial and error. Michael did not have a local RYS project model or personal experience with the project to draw from. In our eyes, a project required at least six months' lead time in order to first identify suitable work projects, and then to build community support and combine the many different elements that enable a program to run efficiently.

In a short time, our anxiety melted away as we witnessed Michael's strong commitment to serve his community. Michael was clearly willing to take on multiple challenges. His efforts likewise instilled in us the confidence that we would discover more about the way God works through the process of our being willing to take on a challenge.

Getting it Done: Substantiating a Vision

Not yet 40 years old, Michael was full of energy and hope. He was the proud father of six children and a faithful husband and friend to his wonderful wife. Michael owned a clunker of a car and he possessed little in the form of those extra materials that many of us regard as necessities. Michael loved his community and was proud of its strengths, but he was also well aware of its weaknesses. He wanted to create paths for people to travel, especially the younger members of his community, paths that would help them stay away from trouble while adding happiness to their lives.

Nambucca Heads residents were nearly all of Aboriginal descent and they struggled with many of the challenges facing other such communities. The painful impact of high underemployment and alcoholism on local families was visible. Vulnerable teenagers susceptible to destructive behavior patterns, and short on self-esteem, often struggled to find something to be proud of. For many, it was an environment where it was easy to lose motivation and difficult to maintain a vision of better times to come.

Michael's hope was to provide a positive alternative for those at risk. It was not an easy task, since a wounded community is not easily moved by a single person's words and ideas. Despite the difficulties, Michael's belief in the power of community was rooted in the ways practiced by his forebears.

He set out to create a safe haven for the Nambucca Heads community to meet. Within the haven, areas were to be set up that held a special appeal for various age-groups. The environment was to be shaped through a spirit of cooperation involving the participation of all those willing. He saw the safe haven as a place where the elders could pass on traditional games and stories, while the young could find friends and share in enriching and fun activities. The safe haven would be a place where each person could find moments of inner peace and, when completed, serve as a source of local pride.

The first major step in Michael's plan was to bring a group of volunteers from other communities, even from other countries, to the area. The volunteers would then paint murals over the graffiti that covered the local bus stop, and clear off and equip an area for a children's playground. As a father of six children, Michael knew that the area needed to be fun for children in ways that would make them want to return time after time.

Michael was hopeful that, by introducing his community to bright, young volunteers, this fresh interaction would stimulate exchanges and provide fresh perspectives. Such social exchanges could encourage positive change as well as promote a renewed sense of cultural pride.

The Process of Coming Together

True to his word, the first project Michael led was held within the declared two-month time frame. In the intense heat of the Australian summer, he brought Australian youth from various communities together and relished the additional participation of volunteers from several different nations. The service teams worked on clearing the land and creating the beginnings of a community park. A covered, open-air building that served as a bus stop was carefully painted by teams of local, national and international youth. Together they created the designs and painted several beautiful cross-cultural murals on the newly refurbished bus stop.

Community members who initially hesitated to mix with "strangers" dropped their reluctance as the work progressed. Several local youth made it to the worksite each day to offer their help. While volunteers took on painting and landscaping tasks, their presence became a growing attraction for curious young children.

The presence of so many children drew numerous mothers to the worksite as they initially came to investigate what their children were doing. With regularity, every day various Elders would come over to offer encouragement and advice. The Elders, who cherished many stories in their hearts, found this a wonderful time to indulge their nostalgia and share these stories. The newcomers found themselves treated to insightful and often colorful narratives of life in Nambucca Heads. We were all starting to really enjoy each other's company.

Michael recognized the growing level of trust as a significant achievement and he took it as an important first step. Keeping to his vision, after the successful conclusion of the first project, he invited RYS back for a follow-up project. The second project, held just three months later, served to further develop the community haven and strengthen ties of trust and friendship.

Building Trust

By the time the third Nambucca Heads project occurred, Michael's reputation as a man worthy of trust was spreading to neighboring communities and beyond. His efforts led him to be awarded nationwide recognition by a major Aboriginal organization. Michael also received an appointment to become an Ambassador of Peace, an honor that he took much pride in. Despite the rising levels of recognition, Michael maintained the same great sincerity of heart, as he continued to drive his old car from destination to destination in the unremitting effort to promote his outreaching projects.

To guarantee that the third RYS project would have the finances it needed, Michael personally raised \$4,000. He used the funds to purchase the materials needed to construct a gazebo and to landscape additional areas of the safe haven. Michael secured much of that financial support by traveling to several communities that contributed as generously as they could. At times he needed help to pay for gas to travel to these communities, but he unfailingly offered every penny he raised for the public purpose. This was his way of pursuing his dream.

For Michael, this work was a family effort. His wife and older children greatly supported his work, generously volunteering their time working at the community safe area. Through their actions the Jarrett family provided a rallying point for the community and they helped to stimulate others' contributions to the public good.

On the morning of the opening day of the third project, participants anxiously awaited the delivery of materials needed to construct the gazebo as well as the additional playground materials. A large truck pulled into the area where the volunteers and community members were gathered and they quickly sprang into action unloading the materials. We were all part of the same team striving to realize the same

purpose. There is a strength, an undeniable power that arises when a community is gathered for a singular purpose.

Our mutual respect grew when the curious volunteers queried members of the community about their culture and history. A mother showed us how to make music using the leaves of a local tree. Some of the men shared insights on survival skills they had learned while trekking—skills that were a vital part of growing up in a traditional Aboriginal community. The learning process clearly went in both directions—Asian and American participants were also showered with questions concerning their own lifestyles and personal interests. A good sign of things to come was noted when a Korean volunteer pointed out that many of their musical interests transcended national and cultural borders.

Sharing from the Heart

As the week in Nambucca Heads drew to a close, we realized that we had only a few more days to spend in the community. The community wanted us to share a fun and memorable evening and organized a cultural program. Cultural programs are often one of the best parts of RYS because they provide participants and community members a time to share their hearts and talents. As an act of love, a great deal of effort is invested in preparing songs, dances, skits and other homegrown entertainment.

The community night offered a combination of cultural performances and personal sharing. We were treated to traditional Aboriginal music, Korean songs, some skits, and several emotional testimonies from community members and RYS participants. While many of the local folks expressed tearful gratitude for our coming and work contribution, RYS participants, in their turn, shared how the people of Nambucca Heads had shown them the true meaning of community.

A fair share of contemporary tunes filled parts of the evening and at one point the local Catholic priest, Father Tony, grabbed his guitar. He went on to serenade the audience with some folksy songs that got the group going in a good way. On the day after the cultural program, Father Tony spoke to Fazida and shared about his experiences of working the past five years in the community. ***“You know dear, last night was the first time in my years here that we had a celebration and no one was drunk, and no one was fighting; they all just simply had a great time. This was something more special than you realize.”*** This was certainly true—we really didn’t understand the impact that our presence and efforts had made.

The Impact of Kindness Has a Life of its Own

A few of the volunteers returned to Nambucca Heads for a visit with their friends. Before arriving, some expressed a fear that the murals would be damaged by graffiti. We simply did not understand what the work meant to the community. As our van turned and we reached the bus stop, the untouched murals brightly radiated a feeling of warm welcome. The murals had achieved the status of a deeply respected symbol and stood as a bright and colorful reminder of the importance of our time together.

In a private conversation, a couple of teenagers shared,

“You know, we still like to drink, but we don’t drink in the safe haven. The community worked real hard to create this special space. It is like a sacred area, and so we don’t drink in it or leave our bottles hanging around that area. The murals are more than paintings for they represent our shared friendship.”

Again, the community’s gratitude for what we had cooperatively accomplished was deeply touching. It is a reminder of the wonder of the power of one. Michael Jarrett, a man driven by love for his people, used that power to ennoble others. His result was not based on economic status, special education, or well-connected friends. That power was encouraged by family and friends and was rooted in Michael’s strong faith in the dignity of each of God’s children.