

## **A life in the day of Robin Dubaba told to me by Val and Brian Cain.**

St. James' church school was originally built for the "mountain people" in Dalby; the village used to be considered a "remote and windswept spot"... but when it comes to remoteness Dalby residents Val and Brian Cain really understand the meaning of the word!

All her life Val has dreamt of travelling, to learn of the lives of other people. Not those surface glimpses from a casual holiday, but to live and work alongside people from other cultures, to know their joys and share their sorrows. A dream she thought may never become a reality when she was diagnosed with breast cancer, just after they had been accepted by VSO to work in Rwanda converting army barracks into a school.

But if you spend any time with the Val and Brian you realise that they are not people who give up easily... after eighteen months of chemotherapy and radiotherapy they were heading off to the fifth most isolated community in the world, Aiome in Papua New Guinea! Able to take early retirement they were to take up the positions of teacher of English, and teacher of maintenance and practical skills, spending the next two years working for VSO, living in a church school in a tropical rainforest.

It was there they met Robin Dubaba the head teacher. Robin himself was not from this area. He has chosen this isolation for himself and his young family because of his commitment to bring education to remote and isolated peoples. He is deeply aware that education is the only tool to help the forgotten rural poor, to fight against corruption and the increase of HIV/AIDS.

The sheer isolation of the place makes it difficult to get staff, it is even harder to keep them when there is no junior school facility for staff children, limited government subsidies... and the two yearly entitlement of a free flight home is cancelled due to lack of government funding! Robin's own young family are being home schooled by his wife as she runs the dispensary in the school.

One of Robin's main concerns is the discrepancy between the numbers of boys and girls that receive education, with only 3% of girls in his own school. Inequality and illiteracy in women is one of the major cultural issues that he is seeking to redress, but with children's parents struggling to provide school fees they often allocate the education to one member of the family only, and inevitably they choose their son who has greater job prospects.

Across the world 66% of hours worked on the planet every year are by women, and yet women earn only approximately 15% of the world's income. 66% of illiterate people in the world are women, usually because they are employed in menial tasks that mean they don't have time to go to school. In many countries women suffer from gender inequality from birth... and yet women play vital roles within families and in society. Development agencies have understood that educating the women equips the whole family to greater social and health awareness.

Many head teachers are remarkable people, but the sheer energy and commitment of Robin, only in his mid thirties, has greatly impressed Val and Brian. The issues that face Robin in a typical day are quite unlike those of most head teachers! He lives on site and is there twenty four hours a day, seven days a week. In a high malarial district, with no medication, it is Robin who is there for the sick children, Robin who twice daily makes radio contact with the outside world, Robin who has created close links with the local community who, with no juridical system, call upon him to act as peacemaker.

The students wake in their bunk dormitories at 5 am; with no electricity in the school, and no funding for the diesel generator maximum use has to be made of all available light. Their day closes with nightfall at 6pm, the darkness leaving students unable to do home study leave. Secondary education is not free and

the 250 students are the privileged and brightest young people in the community... “young people” can include those in their thirties who come to seek education later in life! The school is part of the mainstream National Curriculum, with regular exams and assessments, but privileged or not they still all start their day in the food gardens where Robin works alongside students to cultivate the land. The school has to be self sufficient producing enough for all their students. Robin has even initiated rice plantations, they rear their own chickens, but often there is still barely enough to go round.

Not having enough money to get beyond basic necessities makes delivering a competitive education a continual difficulty. Not only do they not have access to the internet, but sometimes even a piece of chalk would be an advantage. Delivery by air doubles all costs, but the school only receives the same government subsidy as any other school. The main funding is from the school fees themselves, from people who value education so greatly that they will walk for a week to get there.

I wonder if, in our society, it is it too easy for us to undervalue the great privilege of equality and free education. Do we take it for granted? With accepting our rights, do we take up our responsibilities as Robin has?