

## Background Information:

Bethesda is a Disability Training & Support Centre, based in Honiara, Solomon Islands (on the south side of Henderson International Airport). Bethesda's primary purpose is to provide training and support to students with a disability. It is the only facility of its kind in Solomon Islands with one other school for the deaf.

Bethesda first started its Disability Training facility in 2010, with three, eight week live in residential courses for young people with disabilities. It then extended the course to run for 6 months and it now offers 12 month courses where students receive training in biblical principles, personal healthcare, agricultural training, woodwork, social interaction, English, cooking and sewing. At the end of the 12 month course, students are presented with a graduation certificate, which for many of them is the first official recognition of any schooling achievement. This as you can image is celebrated with some gusto, the hall is decorated and a community meal is shared to help celebrate the student's graduation – it's a big deal. Parents, family, friends and staff of Bethesda all attend and make this day very special for the students.

The students are generally young adults between the ages of 18 and 35 (many with little prior schooling) and come with various disabilities such as being wheelchair bound, mental disabilities and several different physical disabilities. The course gives the students the confidence and abilities required for them to be able to integrate and contribute in the day-to-day life of their communities. It changes their lives.

The training facility is situated on approximately 4 hectares of land, has accommodation for up to 20 students in dormitories and provides housing for teachers and facility staff. The poultry farm which the GEMS and Cadets helped fund an number of years back remains operational and produces an income via the sale of eggs. Bethesda also grows vegetables to both feed the students and for sale locally and will shortly start producing free-range chickens (for both eggs and meat) for sale to businesses throughout Honiara. This income helps provide Bethesda with the necessary revenue to keep the school viable.

Bethesda receives some government funding for its teachers however this small limited funding is equivalent to all other schools and does not take into account the additional needs of the students, small class size and residential education. Thus all Bethesda's income generating activities are designed to ensure funds are available to continue to provide this unique training opportunity for students with disability. In addition, donations and special fundraising projects, such as this year's GEMS and Cadets mission badge, is essential to maintain and improve support and training for their students.

## Fundraising Project:

Fundraising money will first go to the repair of the student recreation area which will include the building of lockable storage for games. Additional funds will go to making outdoor shaded picnic tables. The students will be able to participate in both these projects through their wood working classes.



## Field workers make a difference:

Since June 2017, Peter & Carmen Steunenber (members of Hope in the Hills Christian Church) have lived on site as volunteers through AVI – Australian Volunteers International. During 2017 Carmen began teaching the local women how to sew. At the moment these women are part of the families that live at Bethesda. The wives of teachers & general staff, the cook, the cleaner and so on. It is envisaged that during 2019 other women from the surrounding communities will also be encouraged to come along and learn how to sew. The sewing started off with simple items like bags, skirts, purses and has moved on to more difficult sewing like shirts and pants. A simple thing like sewing has empowered them with an eagerness and willingness to continue to learn.

During a visit in 2017 of a “doll collecting tourist friend”, it was made mention that there are no locally produced Solomon Island tourist dolls. This became the inspiration for what we now know as *SoldDolls*. Carmen pitched the concept of making the dolls with the women and whilst a little skeptical at first, once the first sales were made at a trivia night, the women have taken to doll making like you wouldn't believe. Working at night, getting the kids to help, postponing holidays and even the husbands have helped stuffing the dolls. In the 15 months since their introduction over 700 dolls have been sold.

So what happens with the money raised from the sale of *SoldDolls*? It's shared. The individual makers of the dolls get a “fair trade value” based on how many dolls they make, so they now can make an income. The remaining money is then for use at Bethesda. How this money is used is then a joint decision made by Bethesda management and the doll makers, the intention being to improve facilities for all women on site – students, staff and community members. It's extremely empowering for these women. They learn a new skill, they earn some much needed money and then get a voice in what projects the money gets spent on. The intention moving forward is to continue to make dolls and explore different “markets”. Cruise ships, hotels, expats, Australian contacts, shops, etc. Supporting *SoldDolls* supports the women at Bethesda.

The other area of work that Carmen is doing is mentoring a young SI woman -Elsie Palmer, in the Days for Girls program, which has been in operation in the SI since the start of 2016. This program is essentially an education tool for women of all ages around sanitary health and hygiene. It discusses all things that women in Australia take for granted and packs are available at the end of the presentation. These packs include reusable sanitary pads, underwear, soap, etc. While local production of the packs has been and will continue to be part of the SI program, a significant number of these packs are provided to the program from different “chapters” of Australian and New Zealand women's groups who sew and provide all the material to be used in the program. Without their time and generosity, many women in the SI would not be able to afford these basic items and so this ongoing support is vital.

In 2018 these sewing initiatives (*Soldolls* & Days for Girls) became a Project of Bethesda and is now known as – SOLMERE – training and empowering Solomon Women.

As is the case with many organisations in the SI, Bethesda relies on various individuals and entities to provide them with funds, resources and manpower for capital improvements. In late 2017 they had teams from a church in Australia and two local Guadalcanal training centres (RTC - trainee carpenters) who assisted them in commencing a number of capital projects. As mentioned, the free range chicken facility is nearly completed and this will provide income to assist in the day to day running/maintenance of the property. The teams also helped fit-out the sewing rooms that will be used for sewing activities, the making of *Soldolls* and the teaching room for girls lifestyle training skills (sewing, handcrafts, etc).

So the time given by these different organisations and individuals, the making and selling of *Soldolls* and other sewn products, the continued work around women's health and hygiene and the income generated from egg and vegetable sales will ensure that Bethesda will remain an important tool in teaching, equipping and empowering students of all ages and physical dexterity long into the future.

