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Serving the community in Alice Springs and NZ

High schoolers, university students and young professionals tell their stories of two recent community service workcamps for young men: to Alice Springs in the heart of the outback and to the district of Kāeo in New Zealand.

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Alice Springs

Francis Gonzaga

Red dirt, deadly animals and desolate landscapes are what foreigners typically think of when they perhaps never experience this Australia.

That's why it was a surreal experience to travel to the heartland of the country with other residents from Warrane College at UNSW, a residential college for young men located in Sydney's east.

The workcamp was situated in Haasts Bluff, or Ikuntji, a remote indigenous community 230 kilometres west of Alice Springs.

That is about as close as you can get to the middle of Australia, and also as far away from any connectivity.

While the Haasts Bluff Community is united by faith and family, only a small portion have meaningful employment, which creates lingering problems like financial instability.

However, the indigenous have a strong, almost sacred, connection to

their land, and many stories to share about their ancestry and traditions.

The plight of the local people and the beauty of the countryside has long inspired Australia's celebrated landscape photographer, Ken Duncan, who began a foundation and spent many years helping the Haasts Bluff community. He has a vision to use tourism as a platform for them to make a living and tell their stories, as well as to break down prejudices and ignorance among other Australians.

But it was the shared vision of the local elders and even children, that one day there would be a large cross on Memory Mountain, an iconic landmark nearby, which would stand as a sign of the faith of the people, who were converted to Christianity almost exactly 100 years ago.

Our workcamp focused on this initiative. For several days, we dug

eight kilometres worth of pathways around Memory Mountain, while the 20-metre cross was being constructed by professional engineers. Memory Mountain is designed to be a place of future tourism; but also pilgrimage, recollection and reflection. On one of the first days, we climbed to the mountain-top to see the sunrise. Upon arrival it was a truly spiritual experience, one that felt deeply biblical, as a great visual panorama of God's work was unfurled. The array of bush, commanded by towering mountain ridges, a gentle wind, and a blue sky flashed with strokes of yellow, green, red, orange. A camera could not capture the moment, but we hope that the stories of the locals can.

The work was challenging, like any other workcamp, but this time we really felt the remoteness, as we drove out with four-wheel drives, unpacked our tents and set up a

camp at the foot of the mountain. We prepared and cooked food, made a fire, and rose early with the light to work each day. In this environment we celebrated the small and simple things. One day when we had already run out of bread, lunch consisted of a slice of chorizo and a slice of ham, sprinkled with mozzarella cheese, all in the palm of our hands. What a feast!

Getting away from city life and spending time with friends in the silence of the desert certainly led to deeper thoughts and a sense of peace. One volunteer said he could now understand how the first Christians felt: we stood shoulder to shoulder during Mass, which was held in one of the larger tents attached to the campervan. We sat listening to meditations while swatting away flies, without the comfort of a church or chapel. Although we had a tent we could not

keep the Blessed Sacrament, but God was truly present, and our faith was strengthened by kneeling down in the dirt during the consecration.

21 residents from Warrane College may have switched off from technological distractions; but we connected in many other important ways. It was deeply humbling to be accepted into the Haasts Bluff community and work alongside the Indigenous people. Although our work was only a small part of the project, we learned a great deal in a very short time; and were moved by the friendliness and openness of our new friends.

And we felt more connected than ever with this land we call Australia. Our petrol tanks were almost bone dry on arriving back in Alice Springs, and the red dust of the outback clung to our belongings, our hair and our clothes. No matter how much you

clean some items, the red colour remains. And we hope that's not the only thing that sticks with us from those unforgettable days in the heart of Australia.

The Alice Springs work camp was organised through Warrane College, a residence for young men at the University of New South Wales in Sydney.

Kāeo, New Zealand

Peter Gosper

The work camp to New Zealand was a great experience that affected myself and other participants in ways that we did not expect. During this trip, we were able to immerse ourselves in local Maori culture, and contribute to a rural community by repainting an old convent that was being converted into a retreat centre for the local diocese. We also gained

much from learning about the New Zealand culture and customs.

An area of particular interest to me was seeing the plan of life in action. This was something I had been aware of in the past but I had not given it significant thought or time. It was inspiring having a schedule revolving around our prayer and transforming our work into a connection with God. This greatly influenced how I thought about my life and work in Sydney.

The community aspect of the camp was so important as well. Having a positive environment that was joyful, centred on growing closer to God and really putting effort into our tasks and doing it well was eye-opening to me. Having had some time away from the centres of Opus Dei, these experiences reminded me of great environment, people, and direction that I receive from my local centre,

Nairana. This was a great opportunity to improve my relationship with my friends and God as well as improve the community around me.

Seb Aldous

On the work camp, we scrubbed mould and dirt in a convent, before painting it. Some of the challenges included the rain and the wind. This was a big problem because the wind blew away the tarps that were protecting the wet paint. Because of this, the painting we had done was washed away. I learned that no matter how hard it got, we had to persevere.

The spirits were always good, and the rain didn't stop us. We went to a number of different places, including the top of Sky Tower, Auckland, Kerikeri Markets, Kao, Rotorua Hot Springs, and Hobbiton. I think my favourite part of the trip was playing

touch footy in the pouring rain after a hard day's work. This was good fun, and very muddy.

Denis Setiyo

In July 2022, a group of 24 senior high school and university students ventured to New Zealand on a 12-day workcamp. Workcamps are voluntary and aim to assist developing communities by providing services (such as labour, education) to people within those communities who are in need. The district of Kāeo, approximately four hours north of Auckland CBD, is home to a Māori community that hosted us as participants of the workcamp.

We were tasked to assist in the refurbishment of a monastery that was part of the Marae in which we stayed. This included de-moulding, painting and interior redecorating of the monastery to allow for future

use. Along with assisting with refurbishment, some of the participants also engaged and supervised play with some of the primary-aged school children who attended school at the Marae. The projects were often 'stop-start' with unforeseen weather changes, rain and wind. However, by the end of the seven days within the community, we managed to complete the exterior painting along with a base layer of the skirting around the building.

Along with volunteering, the workcamp also allotted time for expeditions and sightseeing. We ventured through Kerikeri, a local town half an hour away, had excursions to St. Paul's Rock, Rainbow Falls, natural hot springs in Rotorua and explored Hobbiton, the filming site of *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* trilogies.

Workcamps are an amazing experience that allow for participants to give of themselves in a real and meaningful way. It's often the people who go on workcamps who get the most out of them, rather than the communities who they go to help. I think this is a great reflection of the beauty of self-giving and that when you give of yourself, you experience joy and peace. When we first arrived in Kāeo, we couldn't speak any Māori and the Māori had difficulties understanding our accents; but we both knew the language of charity which is universal.

The New Zealand work camp was organised through Nairana, a study centre for boys in Pennant Hills, Sydney.

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