Students help rebuild cyclone damaged Vuaki

Just prior to Christmas 2012, a strong cyclone tore through Samoa and Fiji. In the small village of Vuaki in the Yasawa island group of Fiji, no lives were lost, but many houses and livelihoods were destroyed after a 24-hour ordeal. A group of 22 Australians and New Zealanders saved up and pitched in to fund three new houses, and went there to help build them.

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Jacob: The first time I went I loved the hospitality of the people. We can learn a lot from the way they treat others. It was great to get to know the locals so well and see first-hand how they live. It's basic, but very fulfilling and they are just so happy.

Was there anything special about this village that surprised you?

Jacob: Something that stood out to me was the way they lived and practised their faith. For example, a bell would ring three times a day, at 6am, 12pm, and 6pm, and the whole village would sit and pray the Angelus, a Catholic prayer, often in the middle of touch rugby games.

Did their way of life take you by surprise? Do you think you could live like that?

Jacob: Yes it took me very much by surprise, the way in which they are so relaxed, and nothing at all is a problem. One day a friend of mine was sick and needed antibiotics but we could only get the right type from the mainland, so one of the locals immediately took us in his boat - it was almost a 2-hour trip on the water and we had to stay the night there and return the next day. It was so impressive and so selfless. I just can't see that ever happening in our society. Now that I am back home I try to live as much like that as possible, but it is very difficult!

What was the main project? Were there any difficulties or struggles along the way?

Jacob: We had to build three houses for three different families in the

village. We actually had a lot of difficulty getting the materials to the village, so we couldn't quite finish the building in time, but we were guided by carpenters in the village and sometimes I think we just got in the way, so they had no problem finishing off! In fact they were very patient with us and understood that because we had funded it, we wanted to help build them. One family with six children showed their appreciation by having a dinner which included a pig. This was actually a moving moment, as for them, it was a huge sacrifice. There were speeches and tears and it hit us hard that these people were so grateful to us.

What else did you get time for?

Jacob: Since we didn't work on weekends, we were able to visit a lot of neighbouring islands and swim and snorkel while there. It was

amazing because the locals were the best tour guides. We had a lovo (ground oven) dinner, which was a fascinating cultural lesson to see the way they prepare the food, wrapping it in baskets made from coconut leaves and lying them on the hot rocks. They bury the whole oven in sand and wait two hours for it to cook. We also took part in a traditional fishing expedition and of course had the compulsory kava ceremony!

We also had time for daily Mass, praying the rosary and some talks on the Catholic faith. It was amazing that we were able to fit all that in and still have plenty of free time each day. Some of us just took some time out each afternoon and sat in the chapel in front of the Blessed Sacrament for some mental prayer. We had a pretty good daily schedule happening.

What was your favourite part of the trip?

Jacob: Probably just playing games with the locals - they include everyone and they just laugh together if something goes wrong. It is such a positive atmosphere. They haven't got a care in the world and although they are poor, they often have what they consider is enough. I'd say their most prized possessions are their faith and their families.

Jacob Fransen, 17, from Hamilton, New Zealand, went on his second overseas service project to Fiji and says he loves learning from the people there.